

# **WOMEN IN THE NATIONAL MOVEMENT FOR INDIA'S INDEPENDENCE, 1920-47**

(WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO GANDHI'S  
ROLE IN THE MASS MOBILIZATION OF WOMEN)

Thesis submitted to the Bundelkhand University for the award  
of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in History

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## Declaration

I, Anup Taneja, S/o Shri C.S. Taneja, hereby declare that this thesis titled "Women in the National Movement for India's Independence, 1920-47 (With Special Reference to Gandhi's Role in the Mass Mobilization of Women)", submitted by me to the Bundelkhand University (Dept. of History), Bundelkhand, U.P. for the award of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D) degree in History, is an original work carried out by me under the guidance and supervision of Dr. Manju Singh, <sup>Reader,</sup> ~~Asst. Professor~~, Dept. of History, Bundelkhand University. The submission of this thesis is in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Ph.D. degree in History.

I further declare that this thesis or any part thereof has neither been submitted to any other university for the award of any other degree or diploma, nor has it been published elsewhere in any form.

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### CERTIFICATE

I hereby certify that this thesis titled "Women in the National Movement for India's Independence, 1920-47 (with Special Reference to Gandhi's Role in the Mass Mobilization of Women)" is an original and independent research work carried out by Mr. Anup Taneja, one of the editors at the Indian Council of Historical Research, 35, Ferozeshah Road, New Delhi. This research work was carried out under my supervision and guidance, and this thesis or any part thereof has neither been submitted for the award of any degree in the past nor has it been published elsewhere in any form.

I further certify that the submission of this thesis fulfils the requirements for the award of the degree of Ph.D in History (by the Bundelkhand University).

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## **PART – I : THE PRE – GANDHIAN PHASE**

# CHAPTER – I

## INTRODUCTION

Women's studies is relatively a new field of research in India and not much work in this respect has been done. The role of women in the national movement for India's independence has been particularly neglected by scholars. The focus of the traditional history has been on areas of human activity in which men played the dominant role such as wars, politics and diplomacy. Only those women found place in historical writings who either successfully performed roles which were typical of men like Razia Sultan (who was at the helm of affairs at the Delhi Sultanate after the demise of Iltutmish), Rani Laxmi Bai (who gave a tough fight to the British with the purpose of retaining her husband's kingdom) or women who were closely associated with men of eminence like Mumtaz Mahal (who was so exquisitely beautiful that Shah Jahan got inspired to construct Taj Mahal) and Noor Jahan (who greatly influenced her husband Jehangir).

During the last few decades, the scope of history has vastly expanded : it is no longer a chronicle of kings and statesmen, but a study of the masses, of men and women representing different stratas of society. The focus has shifted from the study of rulers or kings to the study of masses. There can be no two opinions on the fact that women constitute a significant segment of society and are an integral part of it. Wars could not have been fought, nor for that matter industrialization could have taken place, had the complementary support of women not been there. The basic purpose behind women's studies is to highlight the role of women in every sphere of life, be it politics, national movement, religion or their role as reformers and revolutionaries, searching for their own identity, particularly those women working at the grassroots level whose role has remained obscure.

However, apart from mere addition to the existing fund of knowledge we have about women in past societies, what is really needed is the reformulation of traditional

concepts and categories. The concept of “work” serves as a prominent example in this respect. It would be significant to note that traditional research work tended to focus on “work” with reference to public sphere only. It is only in recent times that domestic work also has come to be regarded as work.

Further, traditional historiography has not overlooked to see that spread of education among women was important, and that education is an important instrument of social change. But a minute examination of the contents of women’s education reveals that apart from implicit sexual stereotyping, the basic idea behind giving education to women was to establish on a firm footing the traditional notions of femininity. It would be interesting to note in this connection Rousseau’s observations in “Emile”:

Thus women’s entire education should be placed in relation to men, to please men, to be useful to them, to win over their love and respect, to raise them as children, care for them as adults ...

The nineteenth century social reformers echoed similar ideas on women’s education. Even the minds of women in the concerned period were conditioned in such a manner that they had accepted their subordinate status within the patriarchal system without much resistance. From the popular journals of the period also it becomes glaringly evident that the social ideologues accepted that there was complete division in the duties, rights and responsibilities of a man and a woman within the family. The existence of this differentiation was considered of paramount importance so as to ensure peace and harmony within the family and society:

shrishti ne stri purush ka jo bhed paida kiya hai, usme kuch arth hai, aur is bhed ke karan striyon aur purushon ke sansarik kartavyon me bahut antar pad jata hai.<sup>1</sup>

(to some extent the difference created by nature between man and woman is meaningful and due to this the worldly duties of both the sexes differ widely).

Thus the work of bearing and rearing children devolved on the woman, and providing her the means to accomplish this was the responsibility of the man.

Striyon ko santati janan aur palan poshan ka kaam karna hai aur yeh kaam kisi prakar se purushon se nahin ho sakta ....

Pita ka kartavya hota hai is palan poshan ke liye jo samagri zaroori hai use kama kar lain aur stri tatha bachchon ki sab shatruon se raksha karein.<sup>2</sup>

(women are required to perform the task of bearing and rearing children and this the man cannot perform .... It is the duty of the father to earn and make available all things required for the upbringing of children. He also ought to protect his wife and children from enemies.)

Femininity was identified with efficient performance of duties as a mother and as a wife. In her article titled "stri kartavya" (duties of a woman), Smt Indumati Sharma expressed the following opinion :

striyon ka pradhan kartavya hai apne balakon ka palan poshan tatha grihasti ka kaam.<sup>3</sup>

(the prime duty of a woman it to look after her house and her family).

Expressing her point of view on women's education in pre-independent India, Karuna Chanana makes the following observation :

The relevance and curriculum of women's education – even by enlightened leaders – was viewed within the framework of role socialisation.<sup>4</sup>

Another woman writer expressed her opinion in the following words :

Vidya stri aur purush dono ke liye avashyak hai kintu wahi shiksha usi roop main ladkiyon ke liye upayogi nahin ho sakti dono ke marg aur kartavya bhina bhina hain.<sup>5</sup>

(education is essential for both man and woman, but education of a similar kind as that meant for a man cannot be useful for a woman in the same way. The path and duties of both are entirely different.)

Thus, women should be educated not to enable them to seek a job, but to perform their domestic and social duties to the best of their abilities. To quote Indumati Sharma in this connection :

Woh agar padhengi, to naukari nahin, apna tatha apne balakon ka udhar karengi.<sup>6</sup>

(women need to be educated not for the purpose of seeking a job, but for becoming instrumental in educating their children.)



In yet another article, smt. Padmavati Kumariji expressed her opinion as follows :

Ladkiyon ko padhane ka arth yeh kadapi nahin ki unhe B.A., M.A. , ki digriyan dilayee jain, balki avashyakta hai unhe greh sambandhi karyon ki shiksha di jaye.<sup>7</sup>

(it is not essential to give women such education which could enable them to collect degrees. Need is to give them such education which could enable them to carry out their household functions competently.)

In an article published in *Abhyudaya* dated 1.3.1913, the Govt's policy vis-à-vis education for girls clearly showed its hesitancy in framing a universal policy for girls primarily because attitudes varied from region to region. The Govt. accepted that the nature of education for both men and women should vary.

Several articles published in *Madhuri* and *Chand*<sup>8</sup> impressed upon the women the need to inculcate virtues like patience, mercy, tolerance, surrender, etc. There can be no denying that such virtues would definitely suppress the woman's ability to question male domination in the family. Interestingly, women often justified their demand for political rights by saying that in doing so the traditional notion of womanhood would not be put into jeopardy. Thus, in an article titled "striyon ke samanta ke adhikar" (equal rights for women) Indra argued :

Ek dharmik pativrata patni rajnitik matadhikar prapt karne par bhi waisi hi sati sadhavi aur patibhakt reh sakti hai, jaise un vishesh adhikar ke bina.<sup>9</sup>

(a religious and virtuous wife would continue to remain equally virtuous, devoted and faithful even after obtaining the right to vote.)

## II

### Position of Women Before Gandhi

The position and status of women in society truly reflects a country's civilization and cultural attainments. India has a rich cultural heritage, and many women have left an indelible impression in the annals of Indian history in different periods. Even from the numerous finds of Mohenjodaro (like the depiction of the cult of mother-worship, female

figures richly adorned, a bronze of a dancing-girl) it becomes evident that women were given due importance in the social structure of those times.

But with the advent of asceticism in Buddhism and Jainism, the position of women in society began to deteriorate. Under the patriarchal Hindu Society, a women's place became so miserable that she was like a chattel to be gifted away by the husband.

According to the Hindu ideas which traditionally prevailed a girl, a young woman or a matron must do nothing for her own pleasure, even in her own dwelling place. It is clearly stated in the Hindu texts that in childhood, she is dependent on her father, in youth on her husband, in widowhood on her sons; if she has no sons, she must depend upon the kinsmen of her deceased husband; if he left no kinsmen, she must be dependent upon the kinsmen of her father; if she has no such kinsmen, she must be dependent on the *Reya*. A woman must never seek to be independent; she must never wish to separate herself from her father, her husband, her sons, for by such a separation, she exposes both her father's family and her husband's family which is a sin according to the Hindu view of life.<sup>10</sup>

One of the main reasons why the position of women became so pathetic was their increasing seclusion in society.

Early Hindu texts refer to the participation of women in the civic, social and religious life of the community. Very slowly at first, but inexorably, women came to be segregated, the age of marriage kept on dropping, first to prepuberty and then below ten years, till in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries it dipped down to infants in arms. Child marriage was the order of the day. One of its natural concomitants was the child widow. As the prejudice against widow remarriage, permitted and recognised in Vedic times, intensified, it began to affect child widows too. Some young widows chose to immolate themselves on the funeral pyre of their husbands rather than go through life as widows. *Sati* came to acquire a greater social content when Rajput women preferred to die with their warrior husbands rather than be captured by the conquerors. It came to be considered the highest and noblest form of self-sacrifice. Through the ages, force was

used perhaps on a large number of *Satis*; few, perhaps very few, embraced the flames that devoured the husbands.<sup>11</sup>

Dowry is another important custom which was unknown to ancient India. It is on record that prosperous and affluent fathers did present their daughters with lots of gifts like jewels, domestic animals, etc. at the time of their marriage, but it was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that this custom assumed such serious dimensions that it became a bargaining counter in the negotiations of marriage.

Apart from dowry, another social ill of the Hindu society has been the indignities suffered by widows. In no other country has this custom been so appalling as among the Hindus. Tonsure, seclusion in the household, prohibition of her remarriage added to her miseries.

Her head is shaved and all her rights and privileges as a woman are lost. She eats little, sleeps little, rises very early in the morning, and gives herself up to melancholy thoughts the whole day. She is exposed to the severest privations incident upon her state ... So bemoaned a student of Elphinstone Institute, Bombay in 1841.<sup>12</sup>

Parvatibai Athavale – the sister-in-law of D.K. Karve – who was herself a widow, gave vent to her feelings in regard to the shaving of the widow's head in the following words.

... I thought of this shaving off of hair as a religious rite, and that it was my religious duty to continue that practice. Even when I began to teach in the Widows' Home at Hingane (founded by Professor Karve) and saw a widow give up her marks of widowhood, I thought she had committed a great sin. But as I thought further, I began to see that the compulsory shaving of a widow's head was not right. I thought, however, that a voluntary shaving off of her hair, as an initiatory rite into the order of those who give up their worldly life, was a rightful religious act. I also began gradually to realise that unless widows themselves protested against the compulsory shaving off of their hair the question would not be settled.<sup>13</sup>

Just as Parvatibai Athavale has described the plight of widows, Ramabai Ranade, her contemporary, the second wife of M.G. Ranade, has, on the basis of her personal experience, described the inhuman and cruel treatment meted out by the mother-in-law and the sister-in-law to the young bride.

... I used to go downstairs to start on time, and taking my courage in both hands would say, 'I'll come back soon', and rush out without waiting for Wansa's (sister-in-law's) assent. As I walked to the building where the Sabha (founded by Pandita Ramabai) met, my mind would be absorbed and sad as I anticipated all the trouble that would be waiting for me when I return in the evening. But all of this was forgotten the moment I joined the other women...

When I returned home later, losing all the joy and courage I had found at the Sabha, I would stand at the entrance of the house paralysed with terror, because, in the evening, Taisasvbai, Himself's step-mother, and Wansa always sat on the verandah and they used to see me first. At that time of day all the menfolk were away, and these two felt utterly free to say what they would. In Himself's hearing, they would merely issue strict injunctions to me. You have been to the Sabha and come back. Don't think that you can merely change your garment and then help with the cooking and serving the food. Don't even touch the chutney or curry. It is not fitting that ladies who attend Sabhas should do such humble tasks! Go on upstairs and sit in your husband's apartment in idleness. Then you will look well. This was the sort of comment I had to listen to, morning, noon and night. Besides the other relatives in the family, there were five or six women who were family connections. They craved favour by aiding and abetting, the older either publicly or privately, in persecuting me. All I could do when it went too far while I was down with them, was to let a few tears fall silently to ease the burden of my heart.<sup>14</sup>

With the establishment of the Mughal rule in India, a new custom was introduced – purdah. "It was accepted by Hindu society partly in imitation of the manners of the

conquerors, and partly as an additional protection for the women folk".<sup>15</sup> It may, however, be noted that the working and peasant women did not take to purdah. Till the beginning of the twentieth century, the purdah was confined only to the affluent families among the Hindus. Among the Muslims, however, all the women had to adopt the purdah regardless of class or affluence. It was only in recent times that Muslim women from affluent backgrounds have discarded purdah.

Another unsavoury custom that continued in the nineteenth century from the ancient times was that of the *devadasis*. This custom tended to vitiate the religious and spiritual atmosphere of the temples. But social reformers could not do much to curb this unhealthy custom.

In the field of education also the women's position was no better. In a society where illiteracy was rampant and where even men were not educated, one can well imagine the plight of women. In the year 1881-82, the total number of girls enrolled in primary schools was 1, 19, 647 or 6 girls for every hundred boys. By the second decade of the twentieth century, the number increased to ten girls for every hundred boys. In 1921, while 13 per cent men could read and write, only 1.8 per cent women could do so. G.K. Gokhale made untiring efforts for the cause of women's education. He had founded the Servants of India Society in 1905, one of the purposes of which was "assisting educational movements, especially those for the education of women".<sup>16</sup>

Combination of enforced ignorance and overdone religion not only makes them willing victims of customs unjust and hurtful in the highest degree but also makes them the most formidable and the most effective opponents of all attempts at change or innovation ... It is obvious that under the circumstances a wide diffusion of education with all its solvent influences among the women of India, is the only means of emancipating their minds from this degrading thralldom of ideas inherited through a long past...<sup>17</sup>

Another point which needs to be highlighted is that there was discrimination even in the payment of wages to women.

This unjust system is part of the tradition handed down under masculine dominance. Masculine standard is the accepted one and according to that

measure wages are fixed. That a woman worker spends proportionately as much energy and labour and is entitled to the same wages is lost sight of.<sup>18</sup> One of the main reasons for this discrimination was that women were relatively uneducated, ignorant and disorganized. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya summed up the women's plight in the following words

In all domestic service, too, women are at a disadvantage in the matter of wages. And nowhere can they expect redress and get the principle of equal wages established unless this male-dominated society is changed to one founded on equal opportunities and equal rights.

This is the dark and sorry tale of nearly 90% of the women in India. The bourgeois leaders of the feminist movement would do well to remember that what these weary hunger-stricken women cry for is not the right to work but the 'right to the gains of their labour'. The legal rights of inheritance touch them not. They inherit but sorrow and pain from generation to generation. They are the producers of the wealth but they remain beggars.<sup>19</sup>

### III

#### **The White Man's Burden : Charles Grant and James Mill**

In India, a significant landmark was made in the area of gender studies with the publication in 1974 of *Towards Equality* – the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India. This Report drew its conclusions on the basis of nationwide investigations that the dejure equality guaranteed by the Indian Constitution had remained a dream for the large majority of common women. A shift in the scholarly interest from mere recording of political events towards much broader themes like socio-economic studies of the people in different regions has contributed a great deal to the evolution of Gender Studies.

The first references to women in modern India were made by the historians belonging to the Old Imperialist School. The main works of this school are James Mill's *History of British India* (1818), Henry Beveridge's *Comprehensive History of India* published around 1862, and the works of J.C. Marshman, a missionary who wrote around the 1830s. The accounts of foreign travellers, missionaries and officials deal at length with the laws promulgated by the British to put an end to social ills like sati, prohibition of widow remarriage, polygamy, etc.

It has been argued that the British, in order to assert their cultural superiority and to legitimize their rule, tried to capitalize on the pathetic condition of women in India. The works of this school of thought – while dealing with the condition of women and other ills affecting the society – focussed on the concept of the **white man's burden** to redeem the uncivilized Indian society from evils. Thus, “the ‘woman question’ became not only an essential item in the cultural background between the rulers and the ruled, but was also sought to be utilized by the colonialists to establish a peculiar sort of moral *raison d’être* for the British Raj in India”.<sup>20</sup> In this context it would be appropriate to present the views of two of the major exponents of this school – Charles Grant and James Mill.

### Charles Grant

Evangelical missionaries were mainly responsible for projecting a negative picture about the people, society and culture of India. It was their firm conviction that India was in a state of darkness and urgently needed the ‘light’ of the gospel. The basis of their arguments was the prevalence of customs such as sati, female infanticide, purdah, polygamy and, above all, lack of education among women. Charles Grant, who was an important personality in missionary circles, produced an influential tract in 1792 – *Observations on the State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain*<sup>21</sup> – which explained the relationship between Britain and India. He believed that his *Observations* would go a long way in framing a future policy vis-à-vis India, and that the British Empire could be established on a firm footing through the spread of Christianity. He *Observations* greatly influenced the missionary opinion. Besides, “his general

attitude towards the character of the Indian people and his view of the nature of the obligation of British rule later became almost unquestioned assumptions".<sup>22</sup> In the opinion of Grant, "Discord, hatred, abuse, slanders, injuries, complaints and litigations, all the effects of selfishness unrestrained by principle, prevail to a surprising degree".<sup>23</sup>

The women partake of this spirit of discord. Held in slavish subjection by the men, they rise in furious passions against each other, which vent themselves in such bold, virulent and indecent railings as are hardly to be heard in any other part of the world<sup>24</sup>

For Grant,

While men were bound by no moral restraints and lived with 'the insensibility of brutes', Indian women were doomed to a life of servitude and self-imprisonment and 'a violent and premature death'.<sup>25</sup>

Introduction of Christianity, according to Grant, would make the Indians "rise in the scale of civilization".<sup>26</sup> His main idea was that the Raj should establish itself firmly in India. He thus argues :

By planting our language, our knowledge, our opinions, and our religion in our Asiatic territories... We shall probably have wedded the inhabitants of these territories to this country...<sup>27</sup>

He dismissed in no uncertain terms the fear that the propagation of Christianity might ultimately lead to a demand for independence because "Christianity ... views politics through the safe medium of morals..."<sup>28</sup>

Missionaries were especially concerned about the position of women because they saw them as playing a major role in conversion ... To the missionaries, progress in civilization was directly equated with conversion to Christianity.<sup>29</sup>

It may thus be seen that the portrayal of a negative picture of Indian culture by Evangelical missionaries was highly motivated – it was a serious attempt to establish a sanction for permanent British rule in India.<sup>30</sup> Little wonder that this view became widely accepted later for it provided a justification for British rule in India.<sup>31</sup> With this object in mind, British missionary women began to arrive in India in the latter part of the nineteenth century.



## James Mill

Another group which thoroughly condemned the Indian civilization was the Radicals and Utilitarians. This group too left no stone unturned in portraying an extremely negative picture of the Indian culture which ultimately exercised considerable influence on the eventual policy followed by the British vis-à-vis India.<sup>32</sup> The chief spokesman of this school was James Mill whose *History of British India* (1818) aptly reflected the basic Utilitarian approach towards India. This monumental work of six volumes served as a big boost to Mill's career – he was rewarded with one of the Company's most coveted posts – Asstt. Examiner of India Correspondence – by virtue of which he was able to influence greatly the British policy formation and implementation.

Some of the important observations made by Mill are : “In truth, the Hindu like the Eunuch, excels in the qualities of a slave”;<sup>33</sup> “In the still more important qualities, which constitute what we call the moral character, the Hindu ranks very low”.<sup>34</sup> Through the downright condemnation of the Indian politico-legal system and socio-religious institutions, Mill advocated complete overhauling and transformation of the Indian society. In regard to the position of women, Mill states :

The condition of women is one of the most remarkable circumstances in the manners of nations. Among rude people, the women are generally disregarded; among civilised people they are exalted.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, for Mill the British were a civilized people, while the Indians were rude. He asserted that “nothing can exceed the habitual contempt which the Hindus entertain for their women”.<sup>36</sup> Mill's rationalist-utilitarian approach became “the most important single influence moulding English opinion about India for the fifty years from its publication”.<sup>37</sup> This goes to show the extent to which Mill's approach had become popular among the British. Thus,

Evangelical-Liberal-Utilitarian group had made a decisive contribution which utilised the 'woman question' as a means to demonstrate British superiority in the 'moral' domain, legitimise their 'civilising mission' and argue for the continued presence of the Raj in the subcontinent. In short,

the 'woman question' provided the British with one of their favourite justifications for the presence and perpetuation of the Raj.<sup>38</sup>

It is interesting to note that although the official policy of the British was non-interference in Indian culture and religion,<sup>39</sup> yet they promulgated a number of legislations on issues affecting women like sati, female infanticide and child-marriage, raising the age of consent and allowing widow remarriage. Between 1795 and 1930, the British enacted laws on as many as six issues relating to women : sati in 1829; widow remarriage in 1856; age of consent was raised to 12 in 1891; female infanticide was prohibited by the Acts of 1795, 1804 and 1870; child-remarriage was forbidden in 1929.

Another point which needs to be emphasized in this connection is that in enacting these legislations the British had the tacit support of the Indian social reformers of the time, especially Rammohun Roy (on the prohibition of sati) and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (in support of widow remarriage).

#### IV

The scholars belonging to the liberal school, both Indians and foreigners, fell in line with the conclusions drawn by the scholars of the Imperialist School. However, in sharp contrast with the latter, they wrote at length about the efforts made by Indian social reformers to improve the position of women in society. Both James Mill and Beveridge of the Imperialist School had eulogized Bentinck and the Govt's policy vis-à-vis women a great deal, but had little to say about the contributions made by Rammohun Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. But the glaring feature of all these works is that women were merely treated as mute objects on whom various judgements are passed. The reactions of women, their attitudes, and their entity as individuals was totally neglected.

Liberal nationalist historians like Ravinder Kumar, Tarachand and R.C. Majumdar too wrote about women. However, in their accounts too the focus was mainly on issues like the Age of Consent Bill, Widow Remarriage Bill, etc. and not on the perceptions of women themselves. Rukhma Bai's case serves as a glaring example in

this regard. She was married at a very young age to an old man, and when she grew up her parents desired that she should live with her husband. She firmly put her foot down and refused to carry out her parents' instructions. She knocked at the doors of the Court to secure justice. Though many social reformers have written about this case, yet their focus has been mainly on the points of view of the lawyers and the government. No one <sup>ever</sup> ~~were~~ cared to highlight the suffering of Rukhma Bai who was at the receiving end.

Marxist historians like A.R. Desai, K.N. Panikkar and Ashok Sen have made a substantial advance over the earlier ones. They emphasized the need to view colonialism as a backdrop and stressed on the economic factors and their role in moulding socio-cultural trends. However, even Marxist historians made only passing references to women and completely overlooked the perceptions of women themselves.

Historians belonging to the Cambridge School like Anil Seal, Robinson, Washbrook and Baker focused their attention mainly on political developments and caste movements. Here, Rosalin O'Hanlon's work on Jyotiba Phule deserves a special mention. Phule was among the first to establish a link between caste oppression and women's oppression. He played a big role in Maharashtra and advocated the cause of people belong to lower castes. He strongly opposed child marriage, polygamy, and gave due importance to women's education and widow remarriage. Though ignored by earlier historians, but of late Phule has been receiving the attention due to him. Writings of the Subaltern School with its increasing concern on history from below, have mainly concentrated on peasants and tribal movements.

## V

In regard to the work done on women's studies by the social historians in the pre-independence period, two distinct trends are discernible. The first one covers the period from 1890s to 1920s in which most of the works were penned by English women, the

glaring examples being E.F. Chapman's *Notable Indian Women of 19<sup>th</sup> Century* and Fuller's *Writing of Indian Womanhood*. But both these works focus on the upper class and elitist women. In her book titled *Conditions of Indian Women*, the Maharani of Baroda presented an interesting account of contemporary Indian women with special reference to devadasis, prostitutes, female infanticide, sati, etc. Added to these the autobiographies of Sarla Devi, Rasosundari Devi, Binodini Devi and Rama Bai also provide important source material on women's condition. But these works were mainly in the form of narratives and lacked in critical analysis. However, notwithstanding this drawback, these works represent the first important source of information relating to women's position in society.

In the 1930s and 1940s, the above mentioned trend was reflected in the writings of Kamladevi Chattopadhyaya (*The Awakening of Asian Womenhood*) and Margaret Cousins, the founder of the All India Women's Conference (1927). Cousins has tried to portray the position of women in ancient, medieval and modern periods and focuses on the growth of women's literacy. Her works include historically valuable chapters describing the awakening of Indian women to self consciousness who were bound by the common interests of patriotism. She has also tried to establish a link between the women's movement and their participation in the national movement. Her hypothesis is rather simplistic in which the freedom movement is credited to have awakened women. Kamla Devi too makes an effort to give some kind of class analysis and talks not only in terms of elite women, but also those women belonging to labouring classes and peasantry.

In the post-independence period, very little work was done on women till the 1970s. But since 1975 – International Women's Year – some major works on women started pouring in, notable examples being B.R. Nanda, ed., *Indian Women : From Purdah to Modernity* (1976); Neera Desai's *Women in Modern India* (1976); Pratima Asthana' *Women's Movement in India* (1979); Kamladevi Chattopadhyay's *Indian Women's Battle for Freedom* (1983); J. Everett's *Women and social Change in India* (1979); Gail Minault's *The Extended Family* (1981); Tara Ali Baig, *India's Woman Power* (1976), etc. But most of the accounts of women's role in the national movement are descriptive and lack in critical analysis. They do not pay much attention to the

motivating factors or the repercussions of this spontaneous increase of political activity by women from different backgrounds. The focus has mainly been on elite women with a good educational background. The role played by a large number of women from peasantry and the working class, prostitutes, in the national movement directly and also indirectly by thousands of housewives who provided indirect support by efficiently managing their families in the absence of their husbands has not received adequate attention from the historians.

This study is a humble attempt to analyse the factors behind the women's involvement in such large numbers, particularly from specific regions like Orissa and Delhi, in the national movement for India's independence. Efforts have also been made to highlight the changes that were brought about by early reformers, nationalists and later by women's organizations to awaken the women's consciousness. Issues like the impact of women's participation on their lives shall also be examined.

## VI

### **Social Reformers, Nationalists and the 'Women's Question':**

#### **A Critical Analysis**

Macaulay has been referred to as the "founder of modern India".<sup>40</sup> To quote an English historian :

His arrogant brushing aside of Indian civilization, his concentration on fitting an English legal system to India brought about that attachment to British ideas that independent India shows today.<sup>41</sup>

The growing popularity of English language coupled with the encouragement to Christian Missionaries to popularize Christianity greatly influenced some Indian social reformers in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly Raja Rammohun Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. We shall now critically analyse the roles played by Rammohun Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar with respect to the anti-sati campaign and widow remarriage respectively.

#### **Rammohun Roy and the anti-sati campaign**

Rightly described as the father of India's modern enlightenment, Rammohun Roy's efforts in improving the position of women in India mark the starting point in the 19<sup>th</sup> century social reform movement in Bengal.

He was very much critical of the manner in which the early British missionaries condemned the religious beliefs of Indians at street corner meetings. He expressed his feelings of resentment in the following words :

It is true, he wrote, "that the apostles of Jesus Christ used to preach the superiority of the Christian religion to the natives of different countries. Were the missionaries likewise to preach the Gospel and distribute books in countries not conquered by the English, such as Turkey, Persia, etc., which are much nearer England they would be esteemed. In Bengal, where the English are the sole rulers and where the mere name of Englishman is sufficient to frighten people, any encroachment upon the rights of her poor, timid and humble inhabitants and upon their religion cannot be viewed in the eyes of God or the public as a justifiable act."<sup>42</sup>

Further, he was unsparing in his exposure of the ills from which women suffered. To quote him :

... a woman who is looked up to as the sole mistress by the rest of a family one day, on the next, becomes dependent on her sons, and subject to the slights of her daughters-in-law ... Cruel sons often wound the feelings of their dependant mothers, deciding in favour of their own wives... step-mothers, who often are numerous on account of polygamy being allowed in these countries, are still more shamefully neglected in general.

It is not from religious prejudices and early impressions only, that Hindu widows burn themselves on the pyres of their deceased husbands, but also from their witnessing the distress in which widows of the same rank in life are involved, and the insults and slights to which they are daily subjected, that they become in great measure regardless of their existence after the death of their husbands; and this indifference accompanied with the hope of future reward held out to them, leads them to the horrible act

of suicide. These restraints on female inheritance encourage, in a great degree, polygamy, a frequent source of the greatest misery in native families, a grand object of Hindoos being to secure a provision for their male offspring, the law, which relieves them from the necessity of giving an equal portion to their wives, removes a principal restraint on the indulge of their inclinations in respect to the number they marry .... The evil consequences arising from such polygamy, the public may easily guess...

To these women there are left only three modes of conduct to pursue after the death of their husbands. 1<sup>st</sup> to live a miserable life as entire slaves to others, without indulging any hope of support from another husband. 2ndly. To walk in the paths of unrighteousness for their maintenance and independence, 3rdly. To die on the funeral pyre of their husbands, loaded with applause and honour of their neighbours.<sup>43</sup>

Rammohun was of the firm opinion that India would be able to make great strides in the political field through acquisition of modern knowledge through English language. He said that it was because of education that Europe had been able to register immense progress in the field of Industrialization, and that the contemporary ideas of national freedom, democracy and equality of sexes in Europe could be attributed to English language.

It was through the English language that successive generations of Indians including Gandhiji and Jawaharlal Nehru became acquainted with the best Western minds: Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln; Voltaire and Rousseau; Marx, Engels and Lenin; women suffragette leaders on both sides of the Atlantic; the nationalist revolutionaries of Ireland; Tolstoy, Ruskin and Thoreau; and such stimulating thinkers as George Bernard Shaw and Bertrand Russell. This intellectual interaction with the West helped to enrich the content of Indian nationalism.<sup>44</sup>

In the year 1818 – ten years before he established the Brahmo Samaj – Rammohun started his anti-sati campaign with utmost zeal and fervour. One of the main

motivating factors behind this was Rammohun's personal experience of the death of his sister-in-law. He condemned the practice of sati both on humanitarian grounds and on the basis of Hindu scriptures, with emphasis on the latter. In a pamphlet published in 1818, he bitterly criticized the society's apathy towards the ill-treatment of women in India :

What I lament is, that, seeing the women thus dependent and exposed to every misery, you feel for them no compassion that might exempt them from being tied down and burnt to death.<sup>45</sup>

Rammohun, however, had a tough time in communicating his point of view to a society where religion reigned supreme. And to make matters worse he had to contend with the orthodox elements who were not amenable to social reforms. Both the social reformers and the orthodox elements took shelter in the scriptural authority to substantiate their respective points of view. Rammohun quotes from Manu as follows:

Manu in plain terms enjoins a widow to continue till death for giving all injuries, performing austere duties, avoiding every sexual pleasure, and cheerfully practising the incomparable rules of virtue which have been followed by such women as were devoted to only one husband.<sup>46</sup>

While comparing the relative advantages of sati and ascetic life, Rammohun gave preference to the latter; and in substantiation of this he cited from the Vedas : "From a desire during life, of future fruition, life ought not to be destroyed".<sup>47</sup>

The orthodox elements on their part tried to prove that the condemnation of sati by the East India Company was based on misinterpretation of the scriptures, as can be seen below :

But we humbly submit that in a question so delicate as the interpretation of our sacred books, and the authority of our religious usages, none but Pandits and Brahmans, and teachers of holy lives, and known learning, ought to be consulted – not men who have neither any faith nor care for the memory of their ancestors or of their religion.<sup>48</sup>



Thus the orthodox elements firmly believed that sati was a far better option than asceticism simply because it “involves temporary suffering and heavenly blessings, ascetic widowhood is of lesser spiritual value though it involves a life-time of suffering”.<sup>49</sup> It may be pointed out that in recent times this debate has focussed more on the ideational form of discourse. There can be no denying that this is of considerable importance, but at the same time :

Consideration of power and conflict, allegiance and control were of no less consequence. While writings in the past have probably confined themselves entirely to questions of interests and powers, recent writings have tended to gloss over them. The petition of the orthodoxy would however suggest that the awesome power of the state and machinations of vested interests cannot be underplayed.<sup>50</sup>

The petition reads :

‘None of our countrymen feel a pleasure in hearing anything to the disadvantage of the honourable company; they always pray for the welfare of the government ... We have been subject to no distress under the government of the company; it is only the abolition of suttee, sic, which has given disquietude.’<sup>51</sup>

It may thus be seen that the evolution of the women’s question right up to the present day has two divergent aspects : one is the politics of power and state control, and the other is the idiom of discourse.

The scriptural context of the sati debate exercises a great deal of influence on the women’s question. It leads to an analysis of sati purely at the level of religion. Also, it leads to the rewriting of history. According to Lata Mani, women became the focal point around which tradition was debated and reformulated.<sup>52</sup> Besides, tradition takes the shape of brahmanic scriptures, meaning thereby that all the popular forms of customs and beliefs pave the way for a new tradition. Above all, an equation of tradition with scriptures means a necessary break with Islamic influence. All the social evils are thus attributed to the Islamic rulers.<sup>53</sup>

In this context, Rammohun’s approach was genuinely original to start with. His idea was to strike a harmony among the Hindu, Islamic and Western culture and

tradition.<sup>54</sup> But, subsequently, Rammohun towed the line of other Hindu intellectuals of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in their belief that the British rule was a welcome relief from the Muslim tyranny.<sup>55</sup> Thus, while on the one hand Rammohun – in the process of condemning the sati practice – asks the Hindu women to deviate from the *pativrata* ideal, on the other, “his attempt to cleanse Hinduism of its popular form and identify it with solely the Vedanta tradition led to a hegemonization of the upper caste world-view”.<sup>56</sup>

Uma Chakravarty<sup>57</sup> deals with Rammohun’s rewritings on religion and its implication for both sati in particular and the status of women in general. She points out that the goal for women according to the ancient Hindu legislatures was *pativrata dharma* (devotion to husband). But Rammohun believes that the ultimate goal of all Hindus was total surrender to the Divine essence – a merger which could not be effected through the practice of sati. It is in this context that Rammohun presented his arguments against the miserable plight of women. And he further substantiated his arguments by using the Maitreyi Yajnavalkya episode. He emphasized that women had great spiritual potential, and that they were no less than men in this respect. This, in effect, meant that the position of women in the ancient Indian society was quite high in comparison to that of contemporary women.

This was part of the process to reconstitute and ideologize the glorious Hindu past, a process which built an entire gamut of ideas about India and about what legitimately constitutes India, which stretched beyond Rammohan and onto the entire colonial period as later debates in women’s organizations and political parties would show.<sup>58</sup>

Credit, however, goes to Rammohun Roy – and not Governor-General Bentinck who signed the decree – for the abolition of sati in December 1829. He has been rightly hailed as the father of Indian Renaissance. Rammohun propagated his ideas through the three journals launched by him in Bengali, Persian and English around 1821, particularly through the weekly titled *Sambad Kaumudi* in Bengali.

Its first editor was Bhowanee Charan Bannerjee. But he left the paper after the 13<sup>th</sup> issue on account of disagreement with Rammohun Roy’s

campaign against Sati. Bannerjee started a rival weekly called Samachar Chandrika which opposed the teaching of English and espoused orthodox Hindu views including approval of Sati.<sup>59</sup>

The process of intellectual re-awakening and social reform initiated by Rammohun Roy was carried forward by people who owed allegiance to the Brahmo Samaj founded by Rammohun in 1828. After the demise of Rammohun, it was Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905), father of Rabindranath, who led the Brahmo Samaj.

### **Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and his Widow Remarriage Campaign**

If Rammohun is remembered for his anti-sati campaign, Vidyasagar's role in his campaign to legalize remarriage is no less significant. His efforts resulted in the enactment of the Hindu Women's Remarriage Act in 1856. In the light of the following words of Pandita Ramabai relating to the plight of the widow in Hindu society, Vidyasagar's achievement becomes even more significant :

Throughout India widowhood is regarded as the punishment for horrible crimes committed by the woman in her former existence. But it is the child-widow upon whom in an especial manner falls the abuse and hatred of the community .... Among the Brahmans of the Deccan the heads of all widows must be shaved regularly every fortnight. The widow must wear a single coarse garment. She must eat only one meal during the twenty-four hours of a day. She must never take part in family feasts. A man or woman thinks it unlucky to behold a widow's face before seeing any other object in the morning. In addition to all this, the young widow is always looked upon with suspicion, for fear she may some time bring disgrace upon the family by committing some improper act.... Her life, then, destitute as it is of the least literary knowledge, void of all hope, empty of every pleasure and social advantage, becomes intolerable, a curse to herself and to society at large.<sup>60</sup>

It was during the thirties of the nineteenth century when Vidyasagar was a student

... that Calcutta went through the experience of a statutory abolition of sati and of reactions leading to the formation of Dharmasabha; of the craze among a section of the English educated youth to embrace Christianity; and of the panic and tension roused by the threat of 'Young Bengal' to break away from traditional customs and restriction.<sup>61</sup>

However, despite a number of widow remarriages which took place as a result of Vidyasagar's efforts, it did not become an acceptable norm of society. Vidyasagar became an object of severe criticism, and the Act remained a "dead letter". Above all,

Even those lower castes which allows them tend to give them up, believing that if they assimilate their social observances to those of the higher caste, they will enhance the prestige and facilitate their rise to the same level as the latter.<sup>62</sup>

This oppressiveness which is an integral part of the structure of the Hindu caste system needs to be emphasized. Though the process of Sanskritization allows positional upward mobility within the ladder, yet this process has proved to be negative as far as women are concerned. This is a problem which the social reformers found difficult to tackle, more so when we consider that "the operational Hinduism which comes not in its 'spirit', its 'anarchic federation of sub-cultures and textual authorities' but as a caste-based organisation most often vested with both power and violence welding abilities."<sup>63</sup>

Thus Vidyasagar's movement did not meet with much success mainly because of the complex problems of caste which are inherent in Hinduism. Though social reformers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly Rammohun Roy and Vidyasagar, did make great efforts to better the lot of women of India, yet the issues merely touched the periphery of the problem. Most of these issues concerned only the women from the upper castes and middle classes. Women from the lower castes and classes seem to have remained largely unaffected by the customary bans and taboos on widow remarriage and the ill-treatment of widows.

## VI

### The Patriarchal Society in India

Apart from some of the social ills taken up by the social reformers, there were many other problems that affected the majority of women. It is significant that none of the social reform movements questioned the basis of the patriarchal system of society which by its basic ideology considered man to enjoy the supreme position in the family and woman to play a subordinate role. There were restrictions to the woman growing as an independent individual. She was a mere shadow of man. The fact is that most of the social reformers had re-emphasized these familial roles of women – as a daughter she was to be obedient to her father; as a wife she was supposed to be dutiful to her husband even though her husband might be cruel and disloyal to her; and in her old age she was to be an appendage of her son. Thus, within the framework of the patriarchal system, there was little opportunity for women to assert their individuality and to express their opinion in important matters having a bearing upon their lives.

A study conducted by the Census of 1931 revealed that less than 10 per cent of the population of the Indian subcontinent was affected by ban on divorce and widow remarriage.<sup>64</sup> These were essentially high caste Hindu customs and these bans did not extend to the rest of the society. For the majority, the marriage laws were fairly flexible and permissive. Purdah was a custom which was common among the high caste women and the women from the lower castes and classes were not touched by it as is evident from their participation in the labour force – in agriculture, industry and other services. Their problems were not purdah, widow remarriage, divorce and education. Their problems were rooted in poverty; in discrimination of wages which were very low; in their helplessness against exploitation of many kinds; etc. The social reformers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had remained silent on these issues. Thus one of the greatest failures of the reform movement was the inability of the social reformers to expose the nature of oppression that affected women in different layers of our society. Their stress was more on emancipation from above rather than addressing the problem from below.

Till the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the predominating concern of men was to give away their daughters in marriage; and the consideration of caste played a significant role

in the selection of the groom. Very often, the young daughters of Kulin brahmins were married off to polygamous men much older in age to their daughters. The central feature of the patriarchal system was differentiation based on sex. This differentiation was so deep-rooted in the system that even before birth, parents fervently prayed and hoped that the child should be a male one. In keeping with the patriarchal system, the birth of a female child was most unwelcome and taken as a curse or some sort of liability. This finds reflection in the unhealthy practice of female infanticide which was prevalent in India at that time. At the time when the Indian society had to contend with so many unhealthy customs, there was an urgent need to bring about a radical transformation in women's consciousness and to make them realize their true potential so that they could fight for their rights. The 19<sup>th</sup> century social reformers had merely sought to improve the position of women on moral grounds. They did make substantial efforts to abolish customs like sati and child marriage, but at the same time they failed to set any direction for women which would ensure their economic well-being and substantially improve their position in society.

Much later, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was Nehru who suggested a much more realistic approach. In his opinion economic independence of women was more important than moral exhortation. Sumit Sarkar is right in his assertion that :

Fundamental elements of social conservatism such as maintenance of caste distinctions and patriarchal forms of authority in the family, acceptance of the sanctity of shastras, preference for symbolic rather than substantive changes in social practices, all of them were conspicuous in the reform movements of early and mid 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>65</sup>

What reformers were trying was merely to raise the position of women in society and that too within the framework of the patriarchal norms. They never questioned the power imbalance that was structured in the man-woman relationship.

In regard to the reform movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it may be noted that most of the leaders of these were mainly from the middle classes and upper castes and so were their followers. Hence the reforms which they sought to bring about were mainly governed by the considerations of social and economic advancement of their respective groups. Moreover, these reform movements were greatly influenced by the presence of

the British missionaries who were trying to capitalize on the pathetic state of women in Indian society by asserting their cultural superiority.

Even reform movements like the Arya Samaj left crucial areas untouched. Swami Dayanand in his writings does not show much concern about women as individuals. He only recognizes women in familial roles as wives and mothers. Neither in theory nor in practice did this movement question the power imbalance which was structured in the husband-wife relationship in the existing family system. The Arya Samaj did make substantial contributions by way of bringing about social reforms such as the removal of untouchability, prohibition of widow remarriage, etc., but, by and large, the Samaj essentially functioned within the paradigm of the patriarchal system.

The Arya Samajists also took up the cause of female education, but their focus was on the upper caste women. It is evident from the list of subscribers and donors published in the Samaj journals, that the financial support came from the commercial and trading classes. The curricula of Samaj's schools was based on the perception of men regarding the education to be given to women of their castes. Too much emphasis was laid on religion and domestic economy in the curricula. Basically, this sort of education was not geared towards making women financially independent but towards inculcating in them such qualities that would make them modern, educated housewives. The unwillingness to question the legitimacy of certain institutional forms of women's oppression defined the narrow limits within which the Arya Samaj movement operated. In this context Madhu Kishwar has very rightly stated : "they wanted women 'enlightened' but 'dependent'; they wanted to give them 'dignity' but not 'freedom'".<sup>66</sup> According to her, the Arya Samaj had sought to reform women rather than the social condition which made their position miserable.

Prem Chowdhary has successfully brought out the peculiar condition in the prevailing dominant customs and attitudes in rural Haryana in relation to women in the colonial period.<sup>67</sup> She says that while on the one hand, prevalence of customs like bride price, widow remarriage, equal economic work partnership indicate a high status, on the other, the importance given to a male child; extremely unequal female sex ratio as compared to the male; purdah and *ghunghat* (veil) custom; neglect of female education and denial of the right of inheritance to property and the custom of *karewa*<sup>68</sup> (on the death

of her husband, the woman was required to marry the younger brother of her husband or his cousin or in some cases even his elder brother), ~~was~~ reflect the low status of women who were not only exploited at the socio-economic level, but also at the sexual level. *Karewa* -- a white sheet coloured at the corner placed by the man on the widow's head -- represented a social consent for cohabitation. However, the possibility of this custom having certain regional variations cannot be denied. For example, it could be in the form of placing *churis* (glass bangles) on the widow's wrist in full assembly and sometimes even a gold *nath* (nose ring) in her nose and a red sheet over her head with a rupee tied in one of its corners.<sup>69</sup>

Thus, the 19<sup>th</sup> century social reformers wished to bring about some improvement in the condition of women, but at the same time they never raised their voice against the position or power enjoyed by men within the patriarchal society in which the males played a dominant role. The male dominated familial culture reduced the women to the level of objects of sexual gratification. Sex symbols and sex roles stereotyping were the means through which women were subjected within the framework of patriarchy.

Lokmanya Tilak, a political leader of great stature, had a very narrow outlook on the question of women's education. He protested against the idea of imparting higher education to women and strongly criticized the curriculum of the female high school -- the reason being that it was on par with the curriculum of boys and therefore socially unacceptable. To quote him :

Every middle class man wants his wife to be literate and well-trained in household duties, to spend her leisure hours in reading religious texts in order to improve her mind, and to help him in domestic duties. Just as a trade is of primary importance to a craftsman and training is secondary, so are household duties generally primary for women and education incidental .... By the age of 15-16 a woman should be well-trained in housework, and this training will never be available in a school as much as at home. The marital home is the workshop of female education.<sup>70</sup>

Tilak had also criticized the Age of Consent Act, 1891, which had raised the minimum age of a girl (for sexual relations) from ten to twelve. Tilak never liked the



idea of foreign rulers encroaching on the territory of India's social customs. This argument, however, sounded rather incongruous in the light of the consideration that the Hindu orthodox groups in the same period had pleaded for legislation against cow slaughter which would have meant interference with the religious customs of the Muslims.<sup>71</sup>

Swami Vivekanand was critical of the narrow confines within which the early social reformers had operated. To quote him :

Most of the reforms that have been agitated for during the last century have been ornamental. Every one of the reforms touches the first two castes (eg. widow remarriage). Every effort has been spent in cleaning reformers own houses, making themselves nice and looking pretty before the foreigners. That is no reformation. Go down to the basis of the thing; to the very roots. That is what I call radical reformation. Put the fire there ( at the level of masses ) and make an Indian nation.<sup>72</sup>

Two radical social reformers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jyotiba Phule<sup>73</sup> and Hari Deshmukh<sup>74</sup> expressed the opinion that the upper castes had succeeded in strengthening and perpetuating the brahmanical order of society through subjugation of women.

Another factor which draws our attention is the decline of cottage industries in rural areas as a result of introduction of British textiles which were manufactured on a mass scale at highly competitive prices, thanks to the introduction of modern technology. The erosion of village industries and consequently women's productive power worsened their position because they were now even more dependent on their husbands, particularly at the financial level. Veena Das (1986) and Dagmar Engels have argued that the British were not really concerned with the pathetic condition of Hindu women but in employing what they took to be their acute deprivation as evidence for moral unfitness of the Hindu society itself.<sup>75</sup>

Thus while discussing the position of women in India in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century due cognizance has to be given to the presence of the British in India. Both, the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and the late 19<sup>th</sup> century reform movements were greatly influenced by the Western ideas of liberty and rationality. The constant interaction of these reformers with

Western culture greatly affected their thinking; this motivated them to take up those issues which had been condemned by the British. The late 19<sup>th</sup> century reformers have to be seen within <sup>the</sup> framework of growing nationalist activity. The need of the hour had demanded glorification of India's rich cultural heritage, and the reformers started talking about equality for women in accordance with the stipulations of the Vedic texts. Literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century depicted apprehensions in regard to Westernization of Bengali women. The literature of parody and satire in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century clearly contained much that was prompted by straightforward defence of tradition and outright rejection of Western influence. The idea of a Bengali woman trying to imitate the style of European *memsahibs* was just not acceptable, particularly in terms of new items of clothing such as blouse, petticoat, shoes, use of Western cosmetics, reading novels, etc.

## VII

### **Women's Question Resolved ! Partha Chatterjee's Viewpoint**

Thus towards the end of the nineteenth century with the upsurge of the national movement, two contrary pulls could be seen in nationalist ideology: while <sup>of</sup> the one hand there was a tendency to glorify India's past and its rich cultural heritage, on the other there was a desire to change and to bring about a radical transformation of the traditional institutions and opinions in favour of new identities. A resolution to this anomaly was sought to be explained by representing women as the dynamic aspect of the Divine, an authentic body of national tradition, embodying the principle of continuity, and men as the progressive agent of national modernity embodying the static aspect of the Divine, the principle of discontinuity. No need was now felt to plead before the British to bring about social reforms.

According to Partha Chatterjee the reason why the issue of female emancipation had disappeared from the public agenda of nationalist agitation in the late nineteenth century was not because it was overtaken by more emotive issues concerning political power, but because of the refusal of nationalism to make the women's question an issue

of political negotiation with the colonial state. The problems relating to women were now to be looked upon as internal matter which had to be resolved without any kind of British intervention. To quote Chatterjee :

In the entire phase of national struggle, the crucial need was to protect, preserve and strengthen the inner core of the national culture, its spiritual essence. No encroachments by the colonizer must be allowed in that inner sanctum. In the world, imitation of and adaptation to western norms was necessity, at home they were tantamount to annihilation of one's very identity.<sup>76</sup>

Chatterjee argued that the contradictory pulls in the Indian nationalist ideology in its struggle against colonial domination were amicably resolved through demarcation of culture into two distinct spheres --the material and the spiritual. The material domain lies outside us, the spiritual within, which is our true self and has to be preserved to retain our cultural identity. This inner/outer distinction was applied to day-to-day living and you get a separation of the social space into the home and the world. The world is the external, the material, the home, the family, the inner spiritual realm. To quote Partha Chatterjee :

The world is the external, the domain of the material; the home represents our inner spiritual self, our true identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world – and woman is its representation.<sup>77</sup>

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73. He organized the non-brahman movement in Western India; formed Satyashodhak Samaj in 1873 which proclaimed the need to save the lower castes from brahmin domination. He also opposed child marriage, polygamy and advocated women's education and widow remarrage.
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## CHAPTER – II

### AWAKENING OF WOMEN'S CONSCIOUSNESS

Though the social reformers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly Rammohun Roy and Vidyasagar, as has already been stated in the first chapter, did make efforts to better the lot of women in India, yet “the question of women’s political power or equality between the sexes was not on the reformers’ agenda” and “there was no questioning of women’s traditional familial roles or dependence on others”.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the attempts at reform were chiefly motivated by an ideological acceptance of the liberal, rationalist values typical of the West. And in their acceptance of liberal ideas, the reformers were very selective which is evident from the fact that the basic feature of social conservatism were glaringly visible in the reformist movements, namely, discrimination on the basis of caste, adherence to the patriarchal norms within the family and to the injunctions of the scriptures and preference for symbolic rather than meaningful changes in social customs.<sup>2</sup> However, notwithstanding the limited success of the social reform movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it did make some contribution to the progress made by Indian women in many fields in the short span of a little over half a century.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women had started showing signs of their determination to fight for their rights and position in society. Many came from

... reformist families and they formed their own organisations and, in fact, the emergence of a rudimentary women’s movement in India can be traced from this time.... Conscious of their political rights and influenced by western democratic values, these women worked actively to generate political consciousness among women during the early decades of this (twentieth) century.<sup>3</sup>

The contributions made by some female social reformers to the cause of women's education; the emergence of a number of women's organizations; and the publication of several popular Hindi Journals during the period under reference went a long way in the awakening of women's consciousness. The women became increasingly aware of their low position in Indian society as a result of which they became firm in their resolve to assert for their rights in society.

## **I**

### **Contributions of Women Social Reformers to Female Education, 1850-1910**

In view of the fact that in the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century 98 per cent of school-age girls were not attending schools, the Hunter Commission recommended more liberal grants-in-aid for girls' schools, apart from special scholarships and prizes for girls. As a result of these measures, higher education in India got a big boost which is reflected in the fact that the number of women in Indian universities rose considerably. In 1881 – 82 there were only six women in Indian universities, but by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the number rose to 264. And during the same period secondary school enrolment rose from 2054 to 41,582.

In this section, we shall examine in detail the contributions made by some women social reformers, particularly those who played a significant role in promoting women's education.

## **Pandita Ramabai**

She was born in an orthodox brahmin family in a forest village of the western ghats in the year 1855. Her father was held in high esteem as a Shastri who by virtue of his links with the family of the Peshwas had started taking interest in women's education.

After the demise of her parents in 1876, Ramabai was placed in extremely difficult circumstances and was forced to move from place to place with her brother. This sort of nomadic life proved to be a blessing in disguise. She got an opportunity to gain a direct, personal experience of the miserable conditions prevalent in India. To quote her :

We travelled for six years in various parts of India. In our travels we were obliged to go on foot not having the means to afford conveyance. In this way we went a distance of two thousand miles. Thus we had good opportunity of seeing the sufferings of Hindu women. What we saw is not only in one part of India but it was the same in the Madras Presidency, Bombay Presidency, Punjab, the North-West Provinces, Bengal and Assam. This made us think much of how it was possible to improve the conditions of women. We were able to do nothing directly to help them but in the towns and cities we often addressed large audience of people and urged upon them the need for the education of women and children.<sup>4</sup>

In 1878, Ramabai went to Calcutta along with her brother, Shrinivas, where the social reform movements were already in full swing. The heterodox elements greatly appreciated the manner in which she criticized the caste system of the Hindu society. Because of her mastery over the Sanskrit language and her deep knowledge of Sanskrit scriptures, she was honoured with the title of "Pandita".

Ramabai's brother left for his heavenly abode in 1880 in Dhaka. Subsequently, destiny brought her close to an educated Sudra Bengali gentleman named Bipin Bihari Das Medhavi with whom she ultimately got married. In the process of marrying a Sudra, she set a good example of her magnanimity and open-mindedness. However, her marriage was severely criticized by the orthodox Hindus. But the cruel hands of destiny snatched away her husband barely two years of their marriage, and she was left alone with her little daughter.

After the demise of her husband, Ramabai went to Pune where she came into contact with some social reformers. This association infused in her a spirit to make some substantial contributions to better the lot of women, particularly in the field of education. In Pune, she established the *Arya Mahila Samaj*, branches of which came to be established throughout the Maratha country.<sup>5</sup>

While in Poona she gave evidence before the Hunter Commission and stressed the urgent need for women doctors and teachers. Determined to learn English and study medicine, Ramabai sought help from members of the Anglo-Catholic community of St. Mary the Virgin whose mother house was at Wantage in Oxfordshire, England. They were able to give her some assistance while the balance of her expenses were met through the sale of *Stri Dharma Neeti* ("Morals for Women"), her book urging women to take charge of their own lives.<sup>6</sup>

Ramabai's efforts also bore fruit in the form of the starting of a Women's Medical Movement by Lady Dufferin.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, however, Ramabai's non-proficiency in the English language proved to be a big obstacle in her efforts at social reform. This motivated her to learn English and she made friends with Miss Henford who was at the time Superintendent of the Girls School at Pune. This friendship paved her way for going to London where she studied the education system of England and became a Christian.<sup>8</sup>

In 1886, at the invitation of her cousin Mrs Anandibai Joshi,<sup>9</sup> Ramabai decided to sail to America.

To finance this trip and popularize her cause Ramabai wrote *The High Caste Hindu Woman*. Ten thousand copies of this book were sold before Ramabai had left America. In 1887 her Boston admirers set up a Ramabai association to support her work in India. She traveled throughout the United States and Canada studying educational, philanthropic, and charitable institutions and lecturing to various groups. By May of 1888, she had collected over \$30,000 in the name of her association.<sup>10</sup>

On her return to India, she established *Sharda Sadan* in Mumbai. The basic purpose behind the starting of this institution was to provide “an asylum to the ‘destitute high-caste widows’”.<sup>11</sup> Many high caste girls and young widows enrolled themselves in the Sadan to attain education. Anandibai Karve, wife of Prof. D.K. Karve, also became an active member of the Sadan. Though Ramabai had been baptized, but she made it very clear that the “school would not actively preach Christianity or try to make converts”.<sup>12</sup> But

... generally the Hindu community remained suspicious of Ramabai’s motives. Ramabai attempted to forestall criticism by forming an Executive Committee composed of reformers who were known as staunch Hindus. This plan did not work and less than one year later Bombay newspapers carried articles critical of Ramabai and her school. When financial problems forced her to move the school to Poona, the newspaper *Kesari* charged her with converting widows to Christianity. Ramabai’s admitted crime was allowing widows to attend her personal prayer meetings. By 1893 twenty-five girls were withdrawn. But there was no dearth of widows in need of shelter and before long Ramabai had other

students. By 1900 the *Sharada Sadan* had trained eighty women who were able to earn their own living through teaching or nursing.<sup>13</sup>

Circumstances forced Ramabai to shift the centre of her activities from Bombay to Poona where she established her second school, *Mukti*, at Kedgaon – 30 miles away from Poona. By 1900 *Mukti* had become a big institution housing 2000 women and children attending school. The financial needs of *Mukti* were met by an American Committee which willingly approved all her schemes.<sup>14</sup>

Ramabai was of the firm conviction that the caste system was one of the negative aspects of the Hindu society which led to false valuing of the intellect and denigration of physical work. Caste affiliations, she felt, encouraged narrow self-interest and was a big impediment to the development of democratic and secular values. This was one reason why she encouraged the residents of her Sadan to embrace Christianity, though not very forcefully. She had evolved a unique educational programme in which due emphasis was given to literature because of its emphasis on moral values which would inculcate in the students a spirit of caring.

Classes in physiology and botany were included to teach students about their own bodies and the physical world in which they lived. Industrial training was included – in printing, carpentry, tailoring, masonry, wood-cutting, weaving and needlework – as well as training in farming and gardening. All students were required to join ‘unions’ or societies such as the Temperance Union or the Christian Endeavor Society in an effort to break down caste barriers and develop new loyalties based on interest. As

members of these societies, the children learned simple parliamentary rules and were encouraged to take charge of their own affairs.<sup>15</sup>

Contributions made by Ramabai were greatly appreciated by her contemporaries, but all this good work was relegated into the background in the light of her being a Christian, particularly at a time when the hatred for the ruling power was growing with every passing day.

Ramabai was of the opinion that the anger of the people was augmented by the fact that many of her students came from the higher castes. And had she remained confined to the low-caste women, people would not have been much bothered.<sup>16</sup>

Ramabai reacted very strongly when she heard about the Rukhmabai case. She wrote :

Our only wonder is that a defenseless woman like Rukhmabai dared to raise her voice in the face of the powerful Hindu law, the mighty British Government, the 129,000,000 men, the 330,000,000 gods of the Hindus; all these have conspired together to crush her into nothingness. We cannot blame the English Government for not defending a helpless woman; it is only fulfilling its agreement made with the male population of India.<sup>17</sup>

In 1913, at Gulbarga, Ramabai's daughter established a branch of *Sharda Sadan* with the purpose of training high caste Hindu women. On 5 April 1922, Ramabai passed away peacefully in her sleep.



## Anandibai Karve

Anandibai Karve, wife of Professor M.D. Karve, was just like a daughter to Pandita Ramabai. Though she was not a social reformer in the strict sense of the term, yet the persevering efforts made by her to secure education in the face of extremely adverse circumstances deserve to be commended and highlighted. Besides, the whole-hearted support extended by her to Professor Karve in his mission was a big factor behind his success.

We get information about Anandibai Karve from her autobiography written in Marathi titled *Maze Puran* ("My Saga").<sup>18</sup> Though little known outside Maharashtra, it forms an important part of the personal narratives left by women of Maharashtra who lived in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Efforts are now being made to retrieve these narratives which could serve as an important tool for reconstructing women's history.<sup>19</sup> It appears that the motivating factor behind Anandibai's writing her autobiography at the age of seventy-five was that both her husband, Prof. Karve, and her younger sister, Parvatibai Athavale, had published their autobiographies titled *Atmavritta* (Autobiography) and *Majhi Kahani* (My Story) respectively as early as in 1928.<sup>20</sup> It was Anandibai's daughter-in-law, Kaveri Karve, who had edited the former's autobiography which was first published in 1944. The second edition of this was published posthumously in 1951.<sup>21</sup> Kaveri Karve says that Anandibai's life was "not as ordinary as we would think". Anandibai was in a sort of dilemma – she was caught in the terrain between pride in her own abilities and periodic alienations from the society around her. Her self-image reflects a sense of dual vulnerability – as a struggling widow, and as an additionally stigmatized remarried widow. Her position in society was quite embarrassing, particularly in the light of the overarching patriarchal framework.

When at the age of six, Anandibai had contracted small-pox which claimed the life of her next younger sister, her grandmother hoped that Anandibai would also die rather than suffer marital agonies like her elder sister did. But she survived, and was married off at the tender age of eight. Her husband, Mr. Natu, was a widower of twenty-eight

who had done his graduation from Bombay and had been awarded a fellowship by his college. Thus both from the points of view of age and education, Anandibai was not suitable for Mr. Natu. After marriage Anandibai got the name Yashoda. At the time of the wedding, however, it was discovered that Anandibai's grandmother (who had been widowed at a very early age and returned to her parents) had been married in the same Natu family; marrying her grand-daughter into the same family was considered inauspicious. The fear of impending widowhood was soon realized when Mr. Natu died in Mumbai.

Despite the stigma of widowhood attached to Anandibai, her mother-in-law treated her with warmth and affection. But she was required to follow a very heavy routine of housework which included house-cleaning, making elaborate preparations for the daily ritual prayers, and fetching water from the nearby canal at four in the morning. Her brothers-in-law were so pampered that they never volunteered to help her. At times she used to get so much fed up because of overwork, that tears would start rolling from her eyes. But she never grumbled because of the fear that her complaints would reach her parents and bring a bad name to them.<sup>22</sup> Even at the young age of twelve, Anandibai was considered strong enough to handle outside work like supervision of farm work and milking of the cattle and weeding of vegetable plants. This was in addition to the household work which she was already doing. This was her daily routine for the next twelve years, except her one month's annual visit to her parents on the occasion of Deepavali.

Anandibai soon realized that a child widow was "an unprotected plaything", who was looked upon by men in the neighbourhood with lustful eyes.<sup>23</sup> All this would make her feel very insecure. In response to her complaints, her mother-in-law advised her that the only protection for a widow was strength of character and firm but quiet resistance. This advice kept Anandibai in good stead in the years to come.<sup>24</sup>

The emotional and physical implications of widowhood did not register much impact on Anandibai's mind: "Having lost my husband in childhood, I had not felt the

pain so much.... I had been conscious that my life lacked something which other married women had, but had no idea how difficult it really was”.<sup>25</sup>

But things took a different turn when she reached the age of twenty-one in 1887. Her mother-in-law's health had started deteriorating, as a result of which the burden of the ritually important task of cooking fell on her father-in-law. Anandibai was not allowed to do this work, because she had not yet undergone the purificatory ritual of having her head tonsured, as enjoined by the custom of the upper caste Hindus. Such ritual was required to be followed immediately after widowhood in the case of older women, like Anandibai's sister Parvatibai, because, “the widow's hair and bangles must accompany the corpse” of her dead husband.<sup>26</sup> Now Anandibai was left with no other option but to undergo the ordeal, but she made a request that the ritual should be conducted in the privacy of the home rather than publicly at a holy place as had been planned. She writes : “The true realization of my widowhood state came that day”.<sup>27</sup> Anandibai then felt constrained to follow an entirely different lifestyle typical of the widows: she remained confined within the four walls of her room because of her ‘inauspicious’ appearance; was compelled to observe fasts and sacred vows; had to remain content with one meal a day; etc.

After the demise of Narhar Joshi's (brother of Anandibai) wife, it was decided that Anandibai would stay with him at Mumbai. And soon after Anandibai's arrival in Mumbai, Pandita Ramabai established her Sharada Sadan in March 1889 – a residential school for high caste widows. Even though Anandibai was three years more than the prescribed age-limit of twenty, she was admitted as the first student of the Sadan. Thus attending the school and simultaneously managing the household affairs proved to be

quite taxing to Anandibai. Pandita Ramabai's affection and concern for the girls, the dedicated efforts made by her to better the lot of widows deeply influenced Anandibai's mind. Prof. Karve himself admitted later that,

'but for the Sharada Sadan my wife's lot would have been the same as that of her more unhappy sisters'. Among 'the numerous advantages' derived from her association with the Sadan, Karve mentioned 'a keen love of knowledge and a mind enlarged and enlightened', freedom from 'many of our degrading superstitions', confidence and will to 'render good work for her more unfortunate sisters', 'habits of neatness and Order' – qualities which made her 'an excellent wife and an excellent companion in life'.<sup>28</sup>

Ramabai encouraged Anandibai to let her hair grow. It goes to the credit of Anandibai that while efficiently performing the shared household duties, she managed to complete six Marathi and three English standards.

An important feature of the Sadan was that the inmates were free to follow their own religious beliefs. To quote Ramabai :

My idea was to indirectly influence the minds of these girls who would come to me, and enlighten them on many points, and if any of them wished to know anything about the Christian religion, they should have perfect freedom to know it. At the same time I did not wish to hinder them from acquiring knowledge of their ancestral religion if they chose to do so.<sup>29</sup>

Sometimes, out of sheer curiosity, some of the inmates, including Anandibai, used to sit with Ramabai in her room when she would be deeply absorbed in her prayers. This led Ramabai to believe that Anandibai had started taking interest in Christianity. She then wrote to her Godmother in England in 1889 :

One of the [Brahmin girls], a child-widow .... Is much interested in our religion. She sees the difference between a Christian and a Hindoo home. She expressed her wish to become a Christian to our little Mano. The child

was so delighted with it and told me the news with a joyful heart .... The little missionary told the story of our Lord's life as well as she could. Since that time .... The widow has joined us in our morning prayers every day. I read the Marathi Bible and pray in Marathi, so she understands it all. I have asked a Zenana missionary friend of mine to come here and give Godubai (that is, the widow's name) religious instruction.<sup>30</sup>

Anandibai has mentioned in her autobiography that Ramabai used to sympathize with unhappy widows with sweet and soothing words. She was never too persistent in her efforts to convert these unhappy widows into Christianity. But some of them voluntarily accepted Christianity – a religion which did not discriminate against the widows. She also mentions that Ramabai never forced her into converting to Christianity. She merely tried to indirectly gauge her sentiments. And when she found out that Anandibai was not interested in conversion, she gave up.

Subsequently, however, when Ramabai arranged for Bible lessons for the interned girls from the Zenana Mission, the orthodox elements among the Hindus, particularly the upper-caste Hindus, became virulent. This resulted in the Sadan being permanently shifted in the late 1890s to the nearby village of Kedgaon, near Pune. The Sadan then took the shape of Ramabai's overtly Christian Mukti Mission.

Anandibai's remarriage on 11 March 1893 radically changed her life. Credit for this goes to her liberal father who did not feel hesitant in approaching Professor D.K. Karve, his son Narhar's friend. At that time Karve was Professor at the Fergusson College who had recently become a widower. Karve gave his consent to the proposal without any second thoughts. But Narhar – who himself had lost his wife and had decided to marry a somewhat older unmarried girl – did not give his approval. Anandibai, however, was in a dilemma because she yearned for economic independence - which Pandita Ramabai had also stressed – and the idea of remarriage had never occurred to her. But considering that she had already finished her five-year term at the Sadan and there was little hope of her getting a suitable job, remarriage, Anandibai thought, was a better option.

But she had to face a tough time after her marriage. The newly married couple on its first visit to Murud was not well received and was not allowed to stay with the family. Because of the social boycott, the young Karves were not able to visit Murud till the boycott ended ten years later.

The prospect of becoming a mother gave Anandibai immense happiness because of her conviction that “Nature arranges for a tree to flower and a woman to bear children .... A childless woman can be as happy as a hungry man who gets no food but says he has had his fill”.<sup>31</sup> Karve, however, did not want children and never displayed affection for them. She gave birth to three sons named Shankar, Bhaskar and Dinkar. Anandibai’s motherhood had assumed even more significance because she functioned almost as a single parent, playing a major role in raising her sons during Karve’s frequent absences from home.

All her three sons completed their education at Pune and established themselves well in their chosen fields – Shankar settled down with his wife in Africa where he practised medicine; Dinkar became Principal of Fergusson College and his wife Irawati was an anthropologist of repute; Bhaskar, with his wife, Kaveri, worked at the Ashram of Hinge.

Soon after her remarriage, Anandibai started her studies again when she got herself enrolled at the Female High School (also known as Huzur Paga, because the site had earlier housed the Peshwas’ stables). Because of constant flow of visitors at Prof. Karve’s house, which overburdened Anandibai with household work, she could not concentrate on her studies. However, the bubonic plague forced the family to leave Mumbai and go to Amaravati in Vidarbha.

Anandibai had all along desired to seek vocational training. One of the reasons for this was that in the event of any sad eventuality, she wanted to be financially independent. In Nagpur, therefore, she took admission in a diploma course in midwifery

at the Dufferin Hospital. Here also she had to struggle a lot because of the responsibility of bringing up her son Shankar. She somehow managed to complete her one-year course.

Anandibai's long experience at the Sharada Sadan had inculcated in her the desire to do some social service. She therefore raised a number of destitute children in her large household. But despite her deep inclination for social service, Anandibai regrets that she was not allowed to help her husband, Prof. Karve, in his mission of providing education to women. It may be noted in this connection that in 1896 Prof. Karve had established a home for the widows under the name Hindu Sharada Sadan which was supposed to be an alternative to Ramabai's discredited school.<sup>32</sup> In 1898 Prof. Karve had established Anathabalikashram (a home for destitute girls). This school was shifted to the village of Hingne on the outskirts of Pune during the plague epidemic. When Anandibai shifted to Hingne, her husband started maintaining a distance from her. Prof. Karve had realized that bringing about a social reform in the form of widow remarriage was much more difficult than propagating female education. He therefore focussed his attention on female education and wanted to make sure that there was no conflict of interest considering that he himself had married a widow. He was apprehensive that if he had openly propagated widow remarriage, his Ashram would become very unpopular. Ironically, therefore, Anandibai was treated as a ritually impure widow in her husband's own school. No respect was shown to her despite her being the wife of the founder of the school. On the contrary, she had to comply with the orthodox stipulations for the widows. She used to take her meals separately and was not allowed to touch the drinking water used by others. She bitterly regretted throughout her life the sort of treatment which was meted out to her by her own husband.

It would be appropriate to point out here that some renowned social reformers of the nineteenth century had failed to live up to the liberal ideas which they had preached through public speeches and published articles. The following examples stand out prominently in this respect : Gopal Hari Deshmukh – though an ardent supporter of widow remarriage – did not attend one in 1869; justice M.G. Ranade, a great supporter of widow remarriage, married a prepubertal girl when he was a widower of 32; justice K.T. Telang married off his eight-year old daughter despite his firm conviction that girls

should marry late.<sup>33</sup> Prof. Karve too was no exception. He too could not gather courage to face the wrath of the public. Therefore instead of working in close cooperation with Anandibai, he chose the option of maintaining distance from her in his own school.

In 1916 Prof. Karve had started a university which was shifted to Mumbai in 1923, thanks to the generous grant given by the Thackersy family. The university was accordingly named Shrimati Nathibai Damodar Thackersy (SNDT) women's university. Such achievements of Prof. Karve would not have been possible but for the indirect support and cooperation extended by Anandibai. To quote her :- There is no reason why people should have honoured you with the title of 'Maharshi'. It's easy to be called by such titles. What would you have done had I not managed the entire household for you? You have become so great only because I was behind you.<sup>34</sup>

### **Maharani Tapasvini**

Maharani Tapasvini was the daughter of Narayan Rao, a feudal Lord of the fort of Belur (Arcot – South India). Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi was her aunt. She was involved in the revolt of 1857 and was once taken into custody by the British. After she was set free, she devoted herself to the study of Sanskrit and practice of yoga. Subsequently, in 1893, she opened a Sanskrit Pathshala at Bengal which came to be known as Maha Kali Sanskrit Pathshala (Great Mother Kali School). She took a deep interest in the education of girls and contributed a great deal to the cause of women's education in Bengal.

The Mahakali Pathshala of Tapasvini was vastly different from the educational institutions of Ramabai which were financially supported from abroad. The Pathshala had many branches and Tapasvini's effort was a "genuine Indian attempt" to the cause of women's education in India.<sup>35</sup> Unlike Ramabai's schools, this Pathshala did not depend upon any financial assistance from abroad and had no foreign teachers. However, the Pathshalas of Maharani Tapasvini were opposed to the idea of co-education and to the use of one syllabus for both boys and girls. Her mission was to promote female



education which was consistent with the basic tenets of the Hindu religion and moral traditions. Her understanding of an ideal education for women was aptly reflected in the syllabus developed by her which laid stress on the following : study of sacred literature and history; study of Hindu mythology and legendary stories which told about the duties of the mother, daughter-in-law, wife, etc.; and, above all, home sciences like cooking and sewing.<sup>36</sup> The middle class Hindus were extremely happy with the syllabus because in their opinion the female education which was being imparted in those times had a great demoralizing influence on young Hindu women.<sup>37</sup>

As a result of the growing popularity of Maharani Tapasvini's pathshalas, people started coming forward to extend donations to these. The popularity of these institutions can be gauged from the fact that within ten years of their inception, it had 23 branches with as many as 450 students, and that it was placed under the management of a trust with people of eminence as its members, and presided over by the Maharaja of Darbhanga.

Gradually, the original curriculum of this institution underwent a change and it goes to its credit that in 1948 it was considered good enough to be affiliated to the Calcutta University. At that stage even the orthodox Hindus had come to accept the new concept of women's education.<sup>38</sup>

Tapasvini was also closely associated with Bal Gangadhar Tilak.

In 1901, Bal Gangadhar Tilak met Tapasvini at Calcutta. It is said that she advised Tilak to establish contacts with the royal house of Nepal. Emissaries were sent by Tilak seemingly with a purpose to open a tile factory there, but inwardly on a mission to set up an ammunition factory in Nepal, with the help of Tapasvini. Tilak's emissaries were able to get permission to set up the factory and thus, started importing machinery. The British discovered the plot and consequently this plan had to be annulled. Tapasvini continued her work in Calcutta till she died in 1907.<sup>39</sup>

## **Ramabai Ranade**

Ramabai Ranade was the wife of the eminent social reformer Justice Ranade. She was born in 1862 in the Satara district of Maharashtra. She later on became a reputed social reformer.

Ramabai Ranade was greatly influenced by Pandita Ramabai. She came into contact with the latter in the year 1882. Inspired by her, Ramabai Ranade became an active member of the Arya Mahila Samaj. She was so actively involved that she made her house the meeting point where all the important decisions of the Samaj used to take place.

In the year 1884 she made her mark as an orator when she delivered her first speech in the presence of Sir James Fergusson, the Governor of Mumbai, in the Town Hall in Pune. During the course of her speech she made a fervent plea for the opening of a girls high school in the city. However, the orthodox members of her family deeply resented the speech made by her.

Another notable contribution of hers was the starting of a Hindu Ladies Club, the meetings of which used to be held at her residence. She also made efforts to educate illiterate women and widows by holding regular classes at an informal level. She succeeded in mobilizing women who came to the forefront and rendered service at the time when bubonic plague and famine had ravaged the city of Pune.

She continued to inspire and encourage women by giving lectures on first aid and the importance of rendering selfless service to society. The result of the relentless efforts made by her was that she was able to establish the Poona Seva Sadan with branches all over the Bombay Presidency.<sup>40</sup>

Mrs. Ranade's principal objects in starting the home were to teach and educate women through regular classes, to widen their range of knowledge with the help of libraries and lectures, to enable women to participate intelligently in all domestic affairs, social and national responsibilities.<sup>41</sup>

Mrs. Ranade also established the Seva Sadan Nursing and Medical Association in which high caste widows and girls volunteered to work and she was the one who took the first batch of probationers to the Sasoon Hospital, Pune. She was the leader of the agitation for compulsory primary education for girls. Her reputation as writer was established by the production of her book *Reminiscences* now regarded as a Marathi classic.<sup>42</sup>

She was an ardent votary of the suffrage movement which is evident from the fact that she presided over meetings demanding for women the right to vote. Sir H. Lawrence, a member of the Executive Council, was also a great supporter in respect of the granting of voting rights to women. To quote him : “There is no council which would not be honoured, graced and helped by the presence of such a woman as one who is known to us all, Mrs. Ramabai Ranade.<sup>43</sup>

At the request of the Pune Municipality she played a significant role by way of taking care of thousands of women pilgrims and their kids who attended the annual fair at Alandi. Ramabai Ranade, along with a number of social reformers, went to Alandi and served the pilgrims and their infants with utmost devotion.<sup>44</sup>

### **Lady Harnam Singh**

Hailing from the royal household of the Kapurthala state in Punjab, Lady Harnam Singh is regarded as the pioneer in the area of social reform in Punjab. She was of the firm conviction that unless women got education, they would not be emancipated. To quote her : “India’s greatest need is the proper education of our women”. She further says :

What social reforms can we expect if the women are not educated and enlightened. What good are all the doctors if the mothers and wives are not able to carry out their instructions? What good are all the scientific sanitary

rules if the ladies of our household do not understand the principles of hygiene and the benefits of sanitation? Therefore, something should be done to carry on our girls education even after they are married or put behind purdah.<sup>45</sup>

Her active involvement in the social reform activities become evident from the fact that she started an Infant Welfare Centre at Jullundhar and also organized sewing and knitting classes for women. She also founded a ladies club at Simla.<sup>46</sup>

### **Francina Sorabjee**

A great advocate of female education. She decided to establish girls' schools in the Western parts of India. She attached great importance to the unity of the country and envisaged a plan to organize schools for fostering unity and integrity. She founded three schools at Poona. She was a great friend of Pandita Ramabai, who inspired her to undertake the task of female emancipation. She also founded a teachers' training school, in 1872. Her main interest was education and she wanted to bring the children of all classes and communities into common schools. She also started social service in villages.<sup>47</sup>

### **Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain**

In the early part of the twentieth century, another woman who made a significant contribution to the cause of women's education was Begum Hossain. Soon after the demise of her husband she opened an institution for Muslim girls in 1909 in Bhagalpur District, Bihar. She had to face a stiff opposition from her husband's relatives and was asked to leave her home by her step-daughter. This did not deter the Begum from moving forward in her mission. She moved to Calcutta where in 1911 she opened

another school, Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School. Basically, this school was organized for those students who followed the practice of purdah. The medium of instruction in this school was Urdu.

To a great extent the success achieved by the Begum owes to her husband, Syed Sakhawat Hossain, a widower who was educated in the West.

He looked to his young wife for companionship and soon after their wedding gave her lessons in English and encouraged her to write essays. At the age of twenty-one, only three years after their marriage, Rokeya was publishing articles about women's condition. Over the years she wrote a number of articles, short stories, and novels in which she developed her ideas on the need to awaken women to their oppression and the role of education in this process.<sup>48</sup>

She was of the firm conviction that education would be of great help to women both in their traditional roles at home and at the professional level. Besides, through education women would be able to match their husbands at the intellectual level and consequently prove to be good companions for them. The special feature of the Begum's school was that due importance was given to "literacy and practical subjects such as handicrafts, home science, and gardening. The curriculum in Begum Rokeya's school also included physical fitness training. But this was the only deviation from an educational program designed to produce good wives and mothers: companions and help-mates to their husbands and teachers for their children".<sup>49</sup>

## **Sister Subbalakshmi**

Sister Subbalakshmi was married off at the tender age of eleven. But prior to this she had received formal education for about 4-1/2 years. Shortly after her marriage, her husband left for his heavenly abode. Sister Subbalakshmi was left with no other option but to return to her parents' home in Rishiyur, Tanjore district. Her parents took the bold step of sending her to school instead of imposing upon her the constraints within which a Hindu widow was supposed to live. Subbalakshmi's father, Subramania Iyer, however, became an object of severe criticism within his orthodox community which was not amenable to new ideas. He thus decided to leave Rishiyur and go to Madras where he got Subbalakshmi admitted into a convent school. The whole-hearted dedication with which the nuns of the school performed their duties greatly inspired young Subbalakshmi. Their example served as a big motivation as she took the resolution to devote her entire lifetime to the cause of widows' education. Because of this sincerity and dedication, she began to be affectionately called "Sister Subbalakshmi".

After completing her matriculation Subbalakshmi took admission to the Presidency College, University of Madras. She happened to be the first Hindu widow to have taken admission into the B.A. course. This evoked an extremely negative reaction from the orthodox elements of the society and they began harassing her in the streets. But Subbalakshmi was so firm in her resolution that all this criticism did not deter her from moving forward in her mission. After completing her B.A. in 1911, she opened her first school in her father's home in a Madras suburb, which had four brahmin widows as students to start with.

At the time when Sister Subbalakshmi was making efforts to better the lot of the widows, Miss Christina Lynch (later, Mrs. Drysdale) – the Irish Feminist who was appointed as inspectress of female education in Coimbatore – too was working in the same direction. Miss Lynch was faced with the problem of finding appropriate teachers (from upper castes) for the schools. There were in excess of 22,000 widows in Madras

at that time between the ages of five and fifteen, of which the number of brahmins was quite sizable. Miss Lynch informed Subbalakshmi's father

... that she had worked out a plan whereby the government would support a home for young brahmin widows willing to be trained as teachers. Meanwhile, Sister Subbalakshmi was pursuing the same scheme with her friends and relations. In 1912 the Sarada Ladies Union was formed as a women's club to provide its members with an opportunity to hear lectures, discuss new ideas, and collect money for a brahmin girls' school.

In 1912 the government agreed to support a boarding school for training teachers. The government would pay the rent and give scholarships to three girls; the remainder of the operating expenses had to be met through donations and fees. In order to make this plan more acceptable to critics of education for Hindu widows, Miss Lynch proposed shifting the school from a liberal section of the city to the more orthodox Triplicane. This meant Subbalakshmi had to locate a 'home' for the widows. After an extensive search she finally settled on the Ice House, the old warehouse along the beach which once used to store ice from Boston. The Ice House was slowly made habitable for the thirty-five girls who by this time had joined Subbalakshmi. As Sister Subbalakshmi commented, 'There was a lot of gossip and ill-talk' about the large number of girl widows and female staff who occupied the Ice House without male protection. The presence of so many inauspicious women walking about forced local people to modify their schedules.<sup>50</sup>

The curriculum of the school was framed by the government. The purpose was to impart training to women as teachers. To start with they were prepared for regular classes, then they completed the syllabus for matriculation, and finally, they were admitted into Queen Mary's College – the first college for women in Madras which was opened in 1914. Lady Willingdon Training College and Practice School was established in 1922 and sister Subbalakshmi was made the Principal of this institution. This

institution was started with the basic purpose of giving training to teachers. This served as a good opportunity for Sister Subbalakshmi to put her ideas on education into practice. In view of the consideration that the Ice House did not accept widows who were more than 18 years of age, Sister Subbalakshmi opened Sarada Vidyalaya, a high school with boarding facilities for adult widows. Subsequently, she even opened a school for the fisherfolk in the vicinity of the Ice House in total defiance of the caste rules of the orthodox Hindus.

In conclusion of this section we may say that though the educational system of those times was extremely conservative with most of the schools “geographically limited, communally bound, and caste-sensitive”, yet it would be fair to say that education for women had

... unexpected and unanticipated consequences. The first generation of educated women found a voice: they wrote about their lives and about the conditions of women. The second generation acted. They articulated the needs of women, critiqued their society and the foreign rulers, and developed their own institutions. That these institutions were often as conservative as those designed by men should not be taken as a sign that these women wished to preserve the status quo. Rather it should be taken as evidence that they understood their subordinate position very well.<sup>51</sup>

However, a dynamic process had been set in motion with women becoming increasingly aware of their rights through education. The severe constraints within which education was imparted in the early nineteenth century were no longer visible in the early twentieth century when women had started coming out in the open to fight for their rights and to seek a redefinition of their position in the society.



## II

### The Emergence of Women's Organizations

The educational experiments of the late nineteenth century – though very conservative in nature – had the desired impact on women. By the end of the nineteenth century, women had succeeded in shedding their inhibitions to a considerable extent and had started to fight for their rightful place in the male-dominated patriarchal society. Many women representing the elite classes began to form their own organizations. This marked the emergence of a rudimentary women's movement in India. The role played by the Tagore family too went a long way in the direction of the formation of women's organizations. Credit goes to Swarnakumari Devi, sister of Rabindranath Tagore, for organizing the Sakhi Samiti in 1882. Subsequently it became a craft centre for widows. The year 1882 also saw the founding of another organization for women – Arya Mahila Samaj – credit for which goes to Pandita Ramabai. She also established the Sharada Sadan with the purpose of providing employment and education to women, widows in particular. Ramabai Ranade, wife of Justice Ranade, established the Seva Sadan. A Gujarati Stree Mandal was started in 1908. Branches of Mahila Seva Samaj were established in Mysore and Pune in the year 1913 and 1916 respectively.

Initially, these associations were confined to a locality or a city. The credit for starting the first all-India women's organisation, the Bharat Stri Mahamandal (1901) must go to Saraladevi Chaudhurani, the brilliant daughter of Swarnakumari Devi. However, the venture proved shortlived. It was only in 1917 that the Women's Indian Association (WIA) was started in Madras city by Annie Besant, Dorothy Jinarajadasa and Margaret Cousins, together with a group of Indian women. Annie Besant, an Irishwoman who was a well-known socialist, trade unionist and suffragette, was converted to theosophy and came to India in 1893. Margaret Cousins and her husband James came into contact with Annie Besant in India. Dorothy, an Englishwoman, married C. Jinarajadasa, a Sinhalese theosophist.<sup>52</sup>

Women's organizations served as a powerful medium through which "women's opinion" on various issues could be forcefully expressed. These organizations also helped in the development of women's personalities in such a manner that they could gain the necessary confidence to take up leading roles in politics and social institutions.

Those institutions, in turn, played an important role in the construction of the Indian nation. Their model was undoubtedly Western: the view of women and of women's civic responsibility was adopted wholesale. Nevertheless, in the Indian context these organizations developed in harmony with a view of the 'new woman' as a companion and help-mate to man, an ideal mother, and a credit to her country.<sup>53</sup>

Among the various women's organizations which were established subsequent to World War I, the names of three stand out prominently : the Women's Indian Association (WIA), the National Council of Women in India (NCWI), and the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC). The contribution made by these three organizations are given below.

### **Women's Indian Association (WIA)**

The establishment of the WIA in 1917 was the first major attempt to organize women on an all-India basis. By 1921 the organization had established 48 branches and a membership in excess of 2700.<sup>54</sup> Annie Besant, Margaret Cousins and Dorothy Jinarajadasa were the founding members of this organization.

Annie Besant had interested herself in the education of Indian women and had attempted to make them conscious of their social and political rights;

and, of course, for a brief period she had been a pre-eminent nationalist leader, becoming the Congress President in 1917. Margaret Cousins was the founding member of the Irish Women's Franchise League. From 1906 to 1913, she was one of its prominent speakers and campaigners, and had the organising capacity and the patience to initiate an association of women. In the first few months of organising the WIA, she had gone door to door requesting ladies to become its members. She organised a number of meetings and personally encouraged them to come forward to express their opinion on any question relating to women. The women were fearful of criticism from their families and initially showed a lot of reluctance.<sup>55</sup>

Though the WIA was greatly dependent on the Theosophical Society, yet it defined itself

... as an association that included and represented women of all races, cultures, and religions. Each branch was to chart its own course of work in four main areas: religion, education, politics, and philanthropy. The organization defined women as religious 'by nature' and encouraged non-sectarian religious activity. But the most important work was educational and the branches were encouraged to set up adult classes for literacy, sewing, and first aid.<sup>56</sup>

The WIA also involved itself in philanthropic activities like feeding of the poor, providing shelter to widows, and relief for flood victims.<sup>57</sup>

Another important activity of WIA which deserves a special mention was the publication of a monthly periodical titled *Stri Dharma*. Though an English journal, it also included articles in Hindi as well as Tamil, and "carried news of events of interest to women, reports from the branches, and articles on women's condition".<sup>58</sup>

Margaret Cousins, the Secretary of the WIA, evolved a scheme for mobilizing women from different parts of India to act as representatives of preliminary local conferences. The idea was to prepare a memorandum on educational reforms. A letter

written by Cousins had spelt out this scheme and urged women to organize such conferences. To quote her :

There is undoubtedly a great need for women to express their considered views clearly on the subject of present day education for boys and girls in India and especially for girls. If these opinions are formulated into a memorandum, women will be doing a service to the future and will be helping those who at present control the educational destinies of young India.

The following seems to me the most practical way in which to collect the assistance of women to this end and I write to request you to cooperate with women in all parts of India in bringing the project to success and to write and tell me your opinions on the scheme and whether we may count on your active support.<sup>59</sup>

In view of the consideration that the problems relating to female education differed from region to region and even from locality to locality, Margaret Cousins was of the opinion that holding of women's conferences on educational reform was necessary in each province and in clearly defined districts, which would endeavour to find solutions at the local level and at the same time provide a national perspective. She said :

The local conferences should be called and held before the end of October 1926. From each of these conferences, representatives should be elected, who would attend an all India conference which may take place in Poona at the end of December 1926 or in the first week of January 1927. This conference of representatives consisting probably of not more than 40 to 50 women, would have the duty of synthesizing from the proceedings of the preliminary constituent conferences, an authoritative and representative

memorandum by women on educational reform which would be published widely and sent to all Indian educational authorities.<sup>60</sup>

Right since its inception the WIA was interested in Home Rule and women's suffrage and rhetoric that was clearly patriotic.<sup>61</sup> Women should be given full opportunities to work as civil servants; they should accept their responsibilities as "daughters of India", and see the importance of their role in "training, guiding and forming the character of the future rulers of India".<sup>62</sup> Even during the troubled times of 1928-29, the WIA was firm about its policy of bringing about reforms through the Legislative Councils.<sup>63</sup> The WIA did not think it advisable to associate itself with the Civil Disobedience "for this would have jeopardized the relationship they had so carefully worked out with government to secure for women positions as magistrates and on various councils and committees, and to urge the legislation they thought necessary for the improvement of women's status".<sup>64</sup>

### **The National Council of Women in India (NCWI)**

In 1925, the NCWI was established as a national branch of the International Council of Women. Mehribai Tata, wife of Sir Dorab Tata, played an important role in the development of NCWI. But even though a woman of the stature of Lady Tata was involved in establishing the ideology of the NCWI, it failed to grow and became a vital national organization; it remained aloof from the struggle for independence. This was because of its elitist nature and its connection with the British.

The fee for annual membership of NCWI was Rs.15, while for life-membership it was Rs.500/-. If one wanted to become its patron, an amount of Rs.1000/- was required to be paid. When the NCWI was first organized it had three life patrons, namely, Dowager Begum Saheb of Bhopal, Maharani Saheb of Baroda, and Lady Dorab Tata. The President was H.H. the Maharani of Baroda.

The Maharani continued to serve the organization as president in 1928, 1930-34, and 1936-37; from 1938 to 1944 the Maharani Setu Parvati Bayi of Travancore was president. Other women who held important positions on the executive committee included Lady Dorab Tata; Miss Cornelia Sorabji, India's first lady barrister;~~38~~ Mrs. Tarabai Premchand, the wife of a wealthy banker; Mrs. Shaffi Tyabji, a member of one of Bombay's leading Muslim families; and Maharani Sucharu Devi of Mourbhanj, a daughter of Keshub Chandra Sen. These were all women of wealth and position, capable of affording the expensive travel expected of the Council's leaders and with enough space to house the Council office. Many women simply could not afford to join this organization nor did they feel comfortable in the presence of these affluent and titled women.<sup>65</sup>

The NCWI was very conservative both politically and socially. It found village work difficult and unhealthy; the villagers distrustful and hostile.<sup>66</sup> However, at the advice of Lady Tata, a few members decided to visit the slums and get a first-hand experience of the deplorable conditions prevalent there. The most prominent example in this respect is that of Maniben Kara (1905-1979), a social worker who became a leading trade unionist.<sup>67</sup>

### **The All-India Women's Conference (AIWC)**

Established in 1927, the AIWC has been the most truly Indian of the three organizations. The AIWC first met in Pune in January, 1927, following more than six months of serious work on the part of Margaret Cousins and other women belonging to the WIA.

In 1928, the All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reforms came to the conclusion that providing education to women could not be helpful unless harmful social customs were also simultaneously eradicated. In the subsequent year the AIWC expanded its area and included social welfare in its agenda. Since then the principal objective of the AIWC has been to elevate the status and increase the legal and constitutional rights of women as well as make systematic efforts to create social awareness among them.

The AIWC played an active role in initiating and campaigning for social legislature that would improve the position of women. It helped in getting the following Acts passed:

The Sarda Act (1929)

The Special Marriage Act, 1954

The Hindu Marriage and Divorce Act, 1955

The Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, 1956

The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956

The Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women Act, 1956

It also played an important part in getting various other social reform bills enacted and implemented.

The AIWC founded a number of pioneering institutions, many of which now function as autonomous apex bodies in their respective fields. These include:

- \* The Lady Irwin College for Home Science, New Delhi (est. 1932) which is now an institution offering graduate and post-graduate courses in a variety of subjects.
- \* The Family Planning Centre (est. 1937) (now the Family Planning Association of India)
- \* Save the Children Committee (est. 1943) (now the Indian Council of Child Welfare)
- \* The Cancer Research Institute (est. 1952), Madras
- \* The Amrit Kaur Bal Vihar for mentally retarded children (est. 1964), New Delhi, now run by the Mentally Retarded Children's Society.<sup>68</sup>

With the passage of time it has diversified its activities, and programmes which include projects for the eradication of illiteracy, for family planning, child welfare, fighting drug addiction, use of non-conventional sources of energy, vocational training for women, free legal aid to women in distress,



medical relief in villages, and other socio-economic measures aimed at the under-privileged sections of society.<sup>69</sup>

The AIWC is a premier women's organization that has attracted the most talented and capable Indian women of this century, among them: Sarojini Naidu, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Rameshwari Nehru, Dhanvanthi Rama Rau, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Muthulakshmi Reddy, Charulata Mukherjee, Vidyagauri Neelkanth, Hansa Mehta, and many others. It is equipped to play a crucial role to help women attain economic self-sufficiency and fight gender inequalities.

In the historical context, the AIWC has a three-dimensional significance. First, it symbolizes the transfer of leadership of the women's movement from men to women. It has revealed women's early awareness that the responsibility for women's regeneration belongs to women. In the nineteenth century, the movement for women's education and uplift was initiated and led by men. In the twentieth century, as women became more educated, they came to form their own associations and occupy leadership positions. The AIWC has been at once the premier and pioneer organization in this arena. It has been a path-breaker.

Secondly, the AIWC was formed at the instance of Western and Western-educated women. In its early phase, naturally, it looked towards Western role-models. The deliberations of the organization indicate that by now the Western stereotype has been totally rejected. The leadership is

fully Indian, the members are drawn from the Indian middle class, the approach to problems has an indigenous bias, and the models for ideal womanhood are drawn from great women of ancient India.

Thirdly, the organization has provided women with opportunities to come out into the world outside the parameters of the home, in order to contribute something to society at large. Most of the members are housewives and have exhibited initiative and will in carrying out their organizational activities. Here is the genesis of woman-bonding and the building of women's network. For providing the lead in such a crucial area of life, the AIWC must be given a place of pride in Indian history.<sup>70</sup>

### III

#### **Role of Popular Hindi Journals and Magazines(1909-1930)**

At the time when the British were in the process of establishing their rule in India on a firm footing, the position of women in Indian society was extremely deplorable. Social ills like child marriage, female infanticide, purdah, sati, dowry, prohibition of widow remarriage, etc. had manifested in all their ugliness. The British tried to capitalize on this pathetic situation by asserting their cultural superiority and thereby justifying the continuation of their rule in India. The social reformers of the nineteenth century did make efforts to better the lot of Indian women, but their efforts could not transcend the constraints imposed by the patriarchal norms of society and women were

continued to be treated as mere objects on whom judgement was to be passed. Moreover, the social reformers of the nineteenth century were under the influence of the Western culture. An urgent need was thus felt to find an amicable solution to the crisis created by the cultural and ideological encounter between India and England, and for writing a new script for the past which would impart strength to the process of making India as a nation and reflect its new social-cultural and political aspirations. Women's question had to be properly dealt with in the reconstruction of historical consciousness and search for the golden age.

The growing awareness among women in regard to their low position in the male-dominated patriarchal society at different levels motivated them to fight for their rights in the early twentieth century. A qualitative change was seen in the approach to the ongoing search for a new, enlightened woman. As compared to the nineteenth century social reformers, the enlightened women took recourse to the media for highlighting the manner in which they were being victimized with the basic purpose of carving new spaces and roles for women who, like men, had an equally important role to play in society.

It would be important to note in this context that the Indian women's movement did not derive its inspiration from the West, but from its realization that the women's dependence upon male 'charity', 'benevolence', and spiritual concern could not ensure for them autonomy, rights and power. This movement gained its strength from its prolonged and active association with the anti-colonial struggle in India. The main purpose behind the Indian women's movement was to mobilize under a common platform those women who had been silently suffering in the male-dominated patriarchal society.

There was a remarkable mushrooming of women's journals in Hindi in the early years of the twentieth century which went a long way in giving visibility and voice to their target group who were being victimized merely by virtue of their being females. These journals focussed on issues like female education, child marriage, mismatched marriage, polygamy, purdah, female backwardness, etc. Stree Darpan was the pioneer in women-oriented journalism, credit for which goes to Rameshwari Nehru,<sup>71</sup> who had started this journal in 1909. Kamla Nehru was its manager.<sup>72</sup> Daughter of Arya Samajist, Raja Narendranath, Rameshwari Nehru was not particularly impressed by the Arya Samajist ideals of the new woman. It is remarkable that despite her not having any formal education, she undertook the responsibility of editing a woman's journal independently. Incidentally, in the year 1909 itself, Rameshwari Nehru had established the Prayag Mahila Samiti in Allahabad.

Another important magazine to have been published in 1909 was Grihalakshmi which mainly focussed on the traditional role of women and education and it generally echoed the views of Stree Darpan.<sup>73</sup> Arya Mahila was another women's journal published from Varanasi. Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi commented on the journal: "... it is necessary to start a regular feature called Videshi Stree Mandal so that the views of women from other parts of the world and women's movements could be evaluated and represented".<sup>74</sup> Saraswati and Madhuri<sup>75</sup> were two women-oriented journals which were edited by men. Mahila Sarvasu was another women-oriented journal which was published by a man, namely Pandit Devdutt Sharma, and was mediocre in content.<sup>76</sup> Kayastha Mahila Hitaishi was yet another journal for women but its scope was limited to the Kayastha community. One of the better women-oriented journals of those time was

Chand which was first published in 1922 from Allahabad. Its editors were Ramrikh Sehgal and Ramkrishna Mukund Laghate, while Vidyavati Sehgal was its manager.<sup>77</sup>

It may thus be seen that the editors of most the women's journals of those times were men who had coopted their wives as editors. In this respect, and also in many other respects, Stree Darpan's place was unique as it was launched independently by a woman--Rameshwari Nehru--in 1909. The special feature of this journal was that it helped women in gaining proficiency in writing and expressing their feelings. With the purpose of making its readers familiar with the methodology of writing, this journal also published the Hindi translated versions of novels written in Bengali and other languages. The contents of this journal included commentaries, short-stories, poems, articles and book reviews.<sup>78</sup>

In the words of Mahadevi Verma :

“In our society there are two types of women – one who do not know that they are a member of vast human fellowship and they have got an independent identity – in whose development society would benefit by getting rid of parochialism and biases. The second type sees the world through the eyes of men and to follow their footsteps is the *raison d'être* of their lives.<sup>79</sup>

Rameshwari Nehru had realized that since most of the contributors to the contemporary Hindi journals were men, they were not able to project the points of view of women, the social agony suffered by them and their changing self-image in all their dimensions. Thus through the publication of Stree Darpan Rameshwari Nehru wanted to

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bring about a radical transformation in women's minds so that they could rise together in their fight against age-old customs which had inhibited their development both at the mental and physical levels. Besides, her constant endeavour was to awaken the purdah-bound women – who had remained confined within the four walls of their homes for centuries – to the modern world of scientific knowledge and enlightenment. Through the medium of *Stree Darpan* she wanted the orthodox and self-centred men to realize that women were in no way inferior to men, and that it was high time that a proper and healthy environment was created for women so that they could extend their whole-hearted cooperation to men as equals and not as their subordinates. Above all, through the medium of this journal, Rameshwari Nehru wanted to provide communication space to women in order that they could locate them in the mainstream perspective of the national movements for India's independence.<sup>80</sup>

Rameshwari Nehru was born and brought up in the traditional environment, but subsequently she got exposed to the liberal, Westernized culture of Anand Bhavan by virtue of her being the daughter-in-law of Motilal Nehru.<sup>81</sup> Thus she was very much aware about the wide gap between the two points of view which were opposed to each other :the diehard traditionalists and the liberalized, Western. Through the columns of *Stree Darpan* she also wanted to initiate a dialogue between the two schools of thought on every issue – social, cultural and political.<sup>82</sup> The policy of *Stree Darpan* was to project the view points of both the groups. As a result of the balanced approach of the editor, the journal started gaining in popularity. A number of other contemporary newspapers and magazines like *Pratap*, *Vanketeshwari* and *Swarajya* greatly appreciated this approach of the editor of *Stree Darpan* and they started appealing for more subscriptions for it. An

extract from Swarajya (English translation) which was published in the August 1921 issue of Stree Darpan testifies to this :

Rameshwari Nehru and Roop Kumar Wanchu have worked actively among women for a long time. They extend full co-operation to each aspect of our national struggle. Stree Darpan's main objective is to inculcate qualities of self-respect, self-reliance, love for education and reform among women.

We hope that our sisters shall become its subscribers.<sup>83</sup>

Stree Darpan was divided into two sections – for adults, women in particular, and for school-going teenagers and college-going students. The section on adults contained various articles on socio-political issues, patriotic songs, prayers, serialized novels penned by a number of socially aware women. Some of the eminent contributors were : Radha Mohan Gokulji, Satyabhakt, Ramashankar Awasthy, the famous Hindi poet Sridhar Pathak and the journalist Ramrikh Sehgal, Hukma Devi, Abadi Bano, Satyawati, Uma Kumari Nehru, Roop Kumari Nehru and many others. Above all, Mahatma Gandhi's articles, messages and letters to women figured frequently in Stree Darpan from 1920 onwards. These writers represented different regions like U.P., Bihar, Punjab and Central Provinces (now called Madhya Pradesh), West Bengal and Sindh.

The first issue of Kumari Darpan – which was a part of Stree Darpan – was published in 1916 with Roop Kumari Nehru as its Assistant Editor. The basic purpose behind the publication of Kumari Darpan was to motivate the impressionable teenaged girls to associate them actively with Gandhi's constructive programmes, particularly



Swadeshi, and mass-based national movements – Non-cooperation, Civil Disobedience and Quit India.

Rameshwari Nehru had remained the editor of this journal from 1909 to 1928. It is highly creditable that despite increase in the price of stationery and printing, she was extremely persevering in her efforts and made sure that neither the journal's quality nor its size (of over sixty pages) was reduced.<sup>87</sup> And the fact that she managed to publish almost all its issues as per the schedule, with the exception of three months because of certain problems, is highly commendable.

During the period 1911 to 1920, Stree Darpan mainly focussed on the theme of education and the need for opening schools and colleges for women. It was argued that a wide gap had developed between men and women within middle-class urban families mainly because the men had access to Western education. And because of the constant interaction of these men with their English colleagues and bosses, their perceptions had undergone a radical change as a result of which they began looking down upon their tradition-bound and illiterate wives. The Gender specific roles within the family when seen in the light of the new socio-cultural and politico-economic situation tended to widen the gap even more. This in consequence led to the social agony of women and they became victims of constant humiliation at the hands of their Westernized husbands. This is aptly illustrated from the following :

Sabhyata ki poshak ke ander abhi

Bahut se sankiran bhaav ke hriday

Chupe rathe hain jo ki ante karan

Se stri jaati ko paon tale rakhna

Pasand karte hain.<sup>85</sup>

(Even today, a number of men hide their narrow and reactionary views about women behind their civilized appearance. It is their heartiest desire to keep women under their foot.)

The enlightened women of those times were quick to realize that it was because of lack of education that women's position in society had become so embarrassing. They thus began to vehemently oppose the prevalent customs like child marriage and purdah which they thought were great obstacles to women's education. Rameshwari Nehru played a big role in creating awareness among both men and women through the columns of Stri Darpan. She pointed out that just as Japanese women had made immense contributions to each aspect of national life in Japan, in the same way Indian women could also make substantial contributions provided they were given proper education.<sup>86</sup> She strongly felt that education would make women's position better in the balance of power and authority in the family system in which males played a dominant role within the patriarchal framework.

A number of poems and stories which were published in Stree Darpan reflected the Editor's ceaseless endeavours in demonstrating the deep-rooted social prejudice against women's education. Braj Rani, in one of the issues of Stree Darpan, tries to infuse in the minds of women the urgent need to secure education on the basis of the

examples of Gargi, Maitreyi and Madalsa.<sup>87</sup> Yadunandan Prasad views with serious concern the apathy towards female education in the twentieth century, in the light of the rapid strides which were taking place throughout the world in the areas of education and modernization.<sup>88</sup> He argued that in the absence of capable and educated mothers India would not be able to move ahead on the path of modernization and industrialization. In an article entitled *Stri Shiksha* written under anonymity, the author stated that with the help of education women could not only become efficient housewives, but they could also play an important part in the area of social reformation and national reconstruction. Krishna Kumar elaborates this further by saying that education would make women more refined and graceful. Besides, education infused in women self-confidence and skills which also helped them in performing their *pativrata* dharma (devotion to husband) more efficiently.<sup>89</sup> Rameshwari Nehru in her editorial “*Deshi aur Vilayti Nari Shiksha*” pointed out that among the various advantages of education, the most important one was that it enabled women to inculcate in them a sense of pride in being Indians.<sup>90</sup>

An important point which attracted the attention of the social reformers was in regard to the nature and context of education to be imparted. Should the education given to women focus exclusively on domestic affairs, or should she also be simultaneously given education in the area of politics ? Should the education given to women be based on indigenous modes or Western modes or both ? These questions had to be considered in the male-dominated patriarchal society. It would be significant to note that despite the stress laid on expanding the scope of women’s sphere from domestic to public life and on the need to impart education to women, the image of the traditional role played by them as mothers, wives, etc. still dominated the minds of social reformers. This becomes

glaringly evident from the various articles, poems, stories, etc. published in various women's journals like *Stree Darpan*, *Chand*, *Madhuri*, etc. during the period from 1911 to 1930.

However, the result of the publication of so many articles on women's education in *Stree Darpan* and other women's Journals was that a number of social and religious institutions and women's organizations established girls' schools in the northern part of India, especially Lahore, Jullundher, Benaras, Aligarh, Allahabad, etc. Through the columns of *Stree Darpan* Rameshwari Nehru kept the readers informed about the opening of new educational institutions, particularly those that had boarding facilities for girls. She also made fervent appeals to people to extend their whole-hearted cooperation by way of generous donations to these institutions.

The Arya Samaj movement in particular made commendable efforts in imparting education to the women. Among the important institutions established by them the name of Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Jullundher, stands out prominently. This was founded by Lala Devraj in 1889. During the period 1910 to 1926, a number of articles and editorials had appeared in various women's journals, particularly *Stree Darpan*, which eulogized the achievements registered by these institutions. Magan Diwedi Gajpuri wrote in *Stree Darpan* that the role of Kanya Mahavidyalaya was particularly commendable because it was completely self-reliant in financial matters by virtue of which it managed to retain its independence in policy matters and organization.<sup>91</sup> Rameshwari Nehru also praised the contribution of this institution in the field of women's education as a result of which a number of its former students came out in the open to offer their services, prominent among them being Mangla Devi, Anandi Devi, Lajjawati Devi and Savitri Devi.

Lajjawati Devi and Savitri Devi had also served this institution in their capacity as Principal for varying terms.

Two other schools which deserve a special mention are : Girls' School at Benaras (now known as Besant Kanya Mahavidyalaya) and Crosswaithe High School at Allahabad. The former was opened by Annie Besant who was of the firm belief that without the removal of illiteracy among women the goal of Indian women's emancipation could not be achieved, and that <sup>there</sup> ~~their~~ was a direct link between women's education and national reconstruction. In order to infuse a spirit of patriotism among girls, she emphasized that girls should be taught Sanskrit and vernacular literature. This in turn would motivate them to take part in the struggle for India's independence.<sup>92</sup>

Crosswaithe Girls High School was also an important centre of nationalist activity. A number of articles published in Stree Darpan, Maryada and Saraswati highlighted the activities of this school. For example, the November 1917 issue of Stree Darpan carried an article which gave details about the contributions made by this school in the area of women's education. The good reputation commanded by this school drew students from Lahore, Jullundher, Calcutta, Rangoon, etc.

An other important institution which deserves mention is the Aligarh Zenana Madrasa (est 1906). This institution played an important role in encouraging the purdah-bound girls belonging to Sharif Muslim families in India, particularly in Aligarh, to acquire education. It owed its origin to the Mohammedan Educational Conference. It initially started as a primary school but subsequently, as its activities expanded, it got converted into Aligarh Women's College. The activities of this institution were regularly

reported in Khatun and Tahzeeb-i-Niswan (Aligarh). The subjects taught in this college were Urdu-reading and writing, Arithmetic, needle-work and Quran. The husband-wife team of Sheikh Abdullah and Wahid Jahan Begum had contributed a great deal to the management and growth of this institution.<sup>93</sup> However, it is surprising that the contribution of this institution had gone unnoticed in Stree Darpan.

## Purdah

An important theme which found wide coverage in Stree Darpan was purdah. Satyawati had pointed out that mere abolition of the custom of purdah would not serve any useful purpose unless it was accompanied by imparting education to women and removal of other social evils affecting women.<sup>94</sup> Satyawati was of the opinion that the custom of purdah was a big stumbling block in the way of women's education.

Bhagyavati too had strongly condemned the custom of purdah, as can be seen from the following extract:

If India is to recapture its past glory and to progress, women's potentialities ought to be given full scope for development. In order to achieve this objective, the custom of purdah, the inveterate enemy of woman's health, has to be discarded for ever.<sup>95</sup>

In an article titled "Purdeh ki Visham Vedana", Rajdulari emphasized that it was high time that an end was put to gender discrimination, and to work out ways and means whereby the code of conduct for men and women framed by the society is reformulated keeping in mind the progressive trend of the world. While impressing upon the society

the urgent need to uproot and demolish pernicious social customs like purdah, child marriage, mis-matched marriages, dowry exchange, etc. she pointed out that women were in no way less than men at the intellectual level and were therefore competent enough to take part in the national welfare activities. She also stressed upon the need to impart vocational training to women, particularly widows, so that they could earn their livelihood and become financially independent.

Kumari Chandravati Gupta, a teenaged girl, also emphasized the need to abolish the custom of purdah. She expressed the opinion that women's emancipation was closely linked to national progress and urged her sisters to acquire education and fight for their autonomy on an urgent basis, as can be seen from the following extract:

Pyari behno, I vidya grahen karne,  
Purdah hatane aur apne adhikaroan  
Aur swatantrta laine mein ek minute  
Ki bhi deri na karo.<sup>96</sup>

In an article on purdah, Shakuntala Devi condemned this social ill by saying that if the women remain confined within the four walls of their homes, their health would be adversely affected which in turn would affect future generations. She encouraged young girls to shun this practice, and to work hand in hand with men.<sup>97</sup> The result of this anti-purdah campaign was that women in Bihar,<sup>98</sup> Jaipur<sup>99</sup> and Agra<sup>100</sup> began coming out in the open against the unhealthy custom of purdah. Under the presidentship of Uma Nehru, a resolution was passed at Prayag against this unhealthy custom.<sup>101</sup> Another meeting of women was held at Prayag on 23 May 1930 where women assembled in large numbers. This meeting was presided over by Swaruprani who made a passionate appeal to the women to discard the custom of purdah and to be prepared to get imprisoned.<sup>102</sup>

Child marriage was another social ill which had drawn the attention of social reformers. According to the Census of 1921, as many as 321 girls below the age of five were married in Baroda alone.<sup>103</sup> A woman who wrote under anonymity drew attention to Gandhi's advice that child marriage should be completely stopped, and there should be no restriction to the remarriage of those widows whose marriage had not consummated. A series of articles was published in Hindi journals in favour of widow remarriage. Yet another woman wrote that young men should not hesitate in marrying *pati vihina abala* (weak women without husband).<sup>104</sup>

Another social ill which is closely related to widow remarriage was mismatched marriage, where old men married girls who were young enough to be their daughters. This often led to widowhood among young girls which made them feel extremely insecure. This is aptly reflected in the following statement made by a child widow: "As yet my milk teeth have not fallen, how shall I be able to pass my life".<sup>105</sup>

In *Stree Darpan* several cases of old people marrying girls of the age of their grand-daughters were published. In one case a greedy man sold his daughter to an elderly man for seven thousand rupees.<sup>106</sup> A cartoon under the caption "Marriage in old Age" was published with these satirical comments : "Everybody ran helter-skelter to see the bridegroom, as soon as the news travelled people began to say between themselves, whether to call him bridegroom or bride's grandfather".<sup>107</sup> Gulab Devi Chaturvedi from Kota reported the marriage of a man of 60 years with a girl of 14 and sarcastically commented : "bless them, bless them".<sup>108</sup>



In yet another case, a widow who had suffered a lot was forced to lead an immoral life by her in-laws. She was bold enough to write that those who were laughing at her misfortune must be aware of the fact that 75 per cent of the widows were forced to undergo abortions. In her opinion widows should lead chaste lives provided they could restrain their biological urges. And in case they could not do so, they should not hesitate to remarry. She did not find anything wrong in this because by adopting this course they could save themselves from the life of vice.<sup>109</sup>

Another article describes the plight of Bengali Hindu widows who were forced to enter flesh trade in large numbers at the centres of pilgrimage just for the sake of two meals a day. The greedy pandits and priests pocketed all the money. There was total lack of concern on the part of the Hindu society in regard to the fact that such unhealthy practices were taking place at centres of pilgrimage.<sup>110</sup>

Child widows who had never seen their husbands either fell into the hands of vidhamis or were forced to become prostitutes.<sup>111</sup> In many cases widows abandoned their babies at railway platforms or other such crowded places so as to avoid being humiliated in society. It was because of the apathy on the part of the Hindu society that so many widows got converted to other faiths, particularly Christianity. <sup>112</sup>

At the same time, however, some stories written by women-writers highlighted the traditional image of women as silent sufferers, the glaring examples being “Prem Bindu” and “Aradhana”. <sup>113</sup> The consequence was that people began forming the impression that the issue of widow-remarriage was being taken up by male-writers, and that women did not seem much interested. Thus men’s projection of their role as

saviours of widows remained a prominent feature during the earlier part of the twentieth century even at a time when women's movement had started agitating for their rights in a big way.

Rameshwari Nehru too tended to express the opinion that ascetic widowhood was a better option for widows. It appears that she had formed this opinion under the influence of Gandhi.

Indian women have always been honoured and given the highest status in society for their sexual chastity and pure life as well as devotion to their husbands.... Those widows who have chosen to inculcate and personify these qualities and to engage themselves in religious duties selflessly, are to be worshipped by the whole world. But the problem arises in the case of those widows who fail to control their sexual desires. Among them are included the teenaged girls and young adults. We can not understand our leaders' logic when they sanction remarriage for one category and prohibit it for the other. Widows, belonging to both categories, fall in different age-groups but they suffer from the same mental sickness. 114

In fact glorification of widowhood and suppression of sexuality of widows had been a dominant feature of the middle class psyche underlying the process of construction of new woman by Swami Dayanand and Mahatma Gandhi. The former had advocated widow remarriage with the purpose of effecting an improvement in the Hindu race. 115. Gandhi, on the other hand, had recommended remarriage for child widows on compassionate grounds; and for adult widows he advocated remarriage in

order to save them from moral corruption. But he was firm in his opinion that if widows lived a pure life, they could contribute a great deal in the field of social welfare and national reconstruction.

As far as the view point of the growing band of thinking women on the issue as reflected in the columns of *Stree Darpan* is concerned, it may be noted that the majority of the contributors—young housewives, middle-aged mothers and teenaged daughters, etc.—tried to locate the problem of widows and social resistance to their remarriage in the context of the position of women in Indian society. In this connection it would be important to refer to Hukma Devi's article titled, "Stree Unnati Kaise Ho" in which she has drawn attention to the low status of women in society which was reflected in the eagerness of widowers to remarry immediately after the death of their wives.<sup>116</sup> In her article titled, "Ardhangani Ya Paon Ki Jooti", Hukma Devi sarcastically used the expression "Paon Ki Jooti" to show the manner in which the women were humiliated in society.<sup>117</sup>

Through the publication of poems, articles and stories in its various issues during the period under reference, the *Stree Darpan* was able to successfully spread the message of gender-discrimination in the society. In an article titled "Ek Vidhwa Ki Jiwani", an anonymous writer drew a comparison between the privileged position of a widower and the ignominy suffered by a widow in society. She held the male-dominated patriarchal system responsible for this sorry state of affairs. She also vehemently criticized the women for silently suffering at the hands of men, as can be seen below:

In the mistaken perception of Indian society, men seem to be more useful than women. It may be conceded that men have been unjust to women. But the question is why women did not protest against this injustice. Why did they not assert their individuality and rights? Women share more responsibility for their own degradation. 118

Smt. Suryadevi in her poem “Nari Vilap”, presented a true picture of the manner in which educated men looked down upon their submissive and devoted wives.

Pati pass hai B.A., M.A. par ghar mein patni nipat ganwar  
Aise ghar mein prem kahan hai machta hai nit hahakar  
Din bhar karti kaam, nahin par babu ka hota santosh  
Hui zara bhi der kaam mein aa jata jhat unko rosh  
Bahut log shikshit ho kar bhi yun karte naari satkaar  
Dosh nahin hum ablaon ka kyon ham rakhi gyai ganwar. 119

(Husband is a B.A., M.A. The wife is utterly illiterate. In such a home, there is no love but bickerings and tensions. Wife toils the whole day, yet the gentleman is unhappy. A little delay in her work rouses his anger. Many educated men honour their women in this way. Why blame women for lapses when they are illiterate?)

The select band of enlightened women made efforts to channelize growing discontent among women into an organized social resistance. Hukma Devi played an important part in this respect by proposing the establishment of an organization of Kanya Hitkarni Sabha ( a society for the welfare of young girls) with the basic purpose of preparing a united front for Sakriya Pratirodh ( active resistance ), and the publication of a news letter – Kumar Aur Kumari. 120 Hukma Devi went to the extent of making a

request to the editor of *Stree Darpan* to present a representation to the British Government for enacting a legislation against the custom of widower's remarriage. The publication of proposals suggested by Hukma Devi in *Stree Darpan* evoked a very positive response from a large number of women who had offered to extend to her their whole-hearted co-operation in the coming years. All this goes to show that the horizon of feminist consciousness was vastly expanding, thanks to the efforts of Hukma Devi. Thus the role of *Stree Darpan* in raising the level of Indian women's consciousness and also in strengthening the movement for their social and political rights was highly commendable.

Even though both Rameshwari Nehru and Sarojini Naidu were from different educational backgrounds, yet both of them made substantial contributions to the cause of the uplift of women in India. Their approach was different from that of the nineteenth century social reformers. Both of them were greatly inspired by Gandhi who believed that women were not mute objects on whom judgement was to be passed; in fact they were self-conscious subjects with their individual identity who had the potential for becoming arbiters of their own destiny. However, neither Sarojini Naidu nor Rameshwari Nehru had made efforts in the direction of redefining the patriarchal and hierarchal structure of the society wherein there was open discrimination between the two sexes. They were confident that women could assume the new social, economic and political roles within the existing structures.

*Uma Nehru*: She was the elder daughter-in-law of Nand Lal Nehru, the elder brother of Motilal Nehru. Her radical views were also given due projection in the columns of *Stree Darpan*. Though both Uma Nehru and Rameshwari Nehru came from an

aristocratic background and lived in a liberal atmosphere, yet, ironically both viewed the contemporary Indian society, gender-relations, etc. from a completely different perspective. Uma Nehru's approach was much more radical and Westernized and it goes to the credit of Rameshwari Nehru, the editor, that she never hesitated publishing the views of Uma Nehru in *Stree Darpan*. Uma Nehru's article titled "Hamare Samaj Sudharak" serves as a prominent example in this respect. She vehemently criticized the policy of double standards followed by the social reformers. While on the one hand they eulogized the Sita-Savitri ideal and exhorted the Indian women to emulate this, on the other they themselves preferred to acquire English knowledge and to follow the Western life-style. Regarding the social reformers as hypocrites, she wrote:

Sita aur Savitri banane ke liye Ramchandra, Krishna, Bharat aur Yudhishtir ki aavashakta hoti hai. Coat, patloon, aur necktie collar sharier par aur pashchimi aarthik adarshoan ki tarang dil mein lekar aisi stri jati ke utpann karne ki abhilaasha akaashpushp dhundne ke samaan hai. 121

(The task of producing model women like Sita and Savitri seems incongruent with a social situation which does not oblige men to become a Ramchandra, a Krishna, a Bharat or a Yudhishter. Dressed in coat, pant and necktie, and inebriated with the ambition to emulate Western economic ideals, Indian men's craving for such ideal women is akin to search for the proverbial mythical flower.)

In yet another article titled "Hamare Hriday", she pointed out that while on the one hand Indian men were greatly concerned about India's freedom, on the other they

had shown complete apathy to the enslavement of women both at the physical and spiritual levels.

Uma Nehru ridiculed the discriminatory attitude followed in gender-relations in India. She never liked the traditional model where the relationship between men and women was akin to the master-slave relationship. <sup>122</sup> She believed that man-woman relationship should be based on mutual love and respect. The traditional view of Indian men that strenuous mental and physical work spoilt the beauty of women was just not palatable to her. She was particularly critical of the manner in which Indian men tried to suppress women's sexuality and fertility and exploited her labour by calling her Grihalakshmi. <sup>123</sup> In an article titled "Hamare Samajik Dhanche" she put the blame on Indian society which used three patriarchal models to subjugate Indian women – the ancient Hindu, the Turkish and the modern Western. <sup>124</sup> The institutions of family and marriage made her plight so miserable that she was reduced to the level of a helpless dependent – and all this in the name of stri dharma (women's duty). Her radical ideas found ample reflection in her view that gender roles should be reversed wherever men desired access to knowledge and power. It may thus be seen that Uma Nehru's approach to women's issues was absolutely unconventional. In presenting these views she was greatly influenced by the new socio-economic forces which had been set in motion due to the fast changing material conditions both in India and Europe. Uma Nehru went to the extent of describing social and political rights for women and was in agreement with Sarojini Naidu's proposal in regard to women's right to vote. <sup>125</sup>

The question that arises is: how far did the Stree Darpan succeed in its mission of bringing about a change in women's consciousness vis-à-vis their ideals, aspirations and

perceptions? Did it succeed in generating a favourable public opinion through constant debate in relation to the pathetic position of women in Indian society? Rameshwari Nehru, in her capacity as the editor of the Journal, did succeed to a certain degree in refashioning the notions of Indian womanhood, particularly among the Hindi-speaking people of North India. The opinion of the Hindus in regard to the basic traits of a woman's personality owed its origin to patriarchal ideology.<sup>126</sup> The feminine traits like tolerance, submissiveness, devotion to husband (even if he is disloyal), purity, obedience, etc. can be attributed to the belief of the Hindu men that women by their inherent nature are fickle-minded, incapable of rational thinking and restraining their sexual desires.<sup>127</sup> The new generation of enlightened women from the urban middle class background believed that men sought to legitimize the above feminine traits through the scriptural authority. It is in this context that the role of *Stree Darpan* was highly commendable. The editor was persevering in her efforts to dispel age-old notions about women being fickle-minded, irrational, etc.<sup>128</sup> This journal portrayed a very positive image of women and people like Uma Nehru tried to impress upon the women the need to inculcate in them qualities like fortitude, self-confidence, independent thinking, management skills, etc. so that they could match their male counterparts in performing their public roles efficiently.<sup>129</sup> Thus the demarcating line between the feminine traits and male qualities became less prominent. Even ordinary housewives had started becoming increasingly conscious about the importance of women in society. The very idea of looking down upon the birth of female child as a liability sounded repulsive to them. These women, in their articles, were particularly critical of the orthodox men who treated women as "dumb cattle", "paon ki juti" or beasts of burden.<sup>130</sup> Manohar Prasad Mishar's article titled



“Striyon par Dabau” published in Stree Darpan<sup>131</sup> evoked a sharp criticism from the editor who argued that women were intelligent enough to draw a distinction between right and wrong, and that they felt responsible enough to discharge their duties with utmost dedication. Both Rameshwari Nehru and Uma Nehru had severely condemned the patriarchal framework within which lots of restrictions were imposed upon women so that they should steadfastly follow the path as enjoined by the religious scriptures. The idea was to suppress female sexuality and to discourage them from becoming independent. The English translation of the extract from the editorial comments made by the Editor in Stree Darpan is given below:

Our Misharji not only favours freedom for women in their domestic activities but also their progress at a slow pace. He wishes to introduce them to good things. Evidently, he regards women as children. The goal of Indian women’s movement is not showing ‘good and nice things’ but to secure their rights. Undoubtedly, they may sometimes make mistakes but nobody has the right to punish them for their lapses.<sup>132</sup>

Another example of the radical change in the consciousness of women became evident from the example of a young housewife who openly expressed the inhuman treatment given to her by her mother-in-law.<sup>133</sup>

Through the media of Stree Darpan the women also tried to expose the hypocritical attitude of the Hindu males which was evident from their demand for Home Rule from the British authorities and at the same time showing the slightest of concerns for the autonomy of women within the home. A satirical poem aptly reflects this point :

Parishram nahin karenge, aapas mein khoob lareng, Aisi dasa mein rehkar, kya home rule loge? Moderates aur extremists, do dal bana kar Parspar virodh karke, kya home rule loge? Vivah jaldi kar ke, vidhwa bahut bana kar, Un par rehm na kha kar, kya home rule loge?<sup>134</sup>

(You shall not toil but fight with each other and yet you hope to get Home-rule? Live apart as Moderates and Extremists, Live in mutual hostility, And yet you hope to get Home-rule? Marry off little girls, add to the number of widows, Be cruel to them and yet you hope to get Home-rule?)

Madan Mohan Malaviya was totally opposed to the idea of women exercising their franchise on the ground that they were purdahnashin. He expressed his deep resentment when a resolution demanding voting rights for women was brought by the Indian National Congress in its Bombay session held from 26 August 1911 to 31 August 1911. In her editorial titled "Strian aur vote", Rameshwari Nehru took Malaviya to task for his orthodox views.<sup>135</sup>

Women no longer felt hesitant to question the continued assumption of public roles by men. In this connection, it would be appropriate to quote Hridaya Mohini who had openly expressed her disagreement with the views expressed by Padam Singh Sharma in an article titled "Stree Shiksha Par Akbar Ke Vichar" published in Grihalakshmi:

Public mein kya zaroor ki ja kar tane raho, Parh likh kar apne ghar hi mein ishwar bane raho, Tum ko bitha ke taak par pooja karenge hum, Bhojo jo ghar mein baith, na latton ko hove gam.<sup>136</sup>

(Why is it obligatory for you to project yourself as public men? Get knowledge and stay like gods at home. We shall place you as idols in the nook and worship you. If you choose to enjoy the domestic pleasures you will cause no anxiety to Sahebs.)

A large number of housewives who had become victims of undue humiliation, repression and economic dependence both in their husband's and natal home, had started demanding a better treatment in society based on the principle of equity, fair play and justice and shedding of the discriminatory treatment meted out to them merely because they were females. Above all, they wanted to have their fair share in socio-economic power, property rights and social status.<sup>137</sup>

Thus as a result of the contributions made by Stree Darpan through the publication of a number of thought-provoking articles, there began to emerge a change in attitudes in traditional families. Definitely, their perspective on gender- relations had undergone a perceptive change. The traditional perception of women as ardhangini which had reduced her to the level of a mere shadow of her husband devoid of any independent thinking began to show a perceptible change. The new woman represented both the traditional image of womanhood capable of performing their household duties efficiently and the modern, enlightened image capable of assuming responsibilities as cultured and intelligent housewives.

This new role-model for women was accepted by the progressive women thinkers of those times because under the new model due recognition was given to women's independent thinking, their intellectual capabilities and their existence as individuals in their own right.<sup>138</sup> The patidharma concept which required women to completely

surrender their individuality to their husbands at every level – mind, body, soul – was put under scrutiny.<sup>139</sup> Women felt that on a reciprocal basis their husbands also should follow the ideal of patnivrata dharma<sup>140</sup> and remain totally loyal to their wives. Thus in the new equation of gender-relations, both the husband and wife were to be treated on an equal footing. They could retain their individual identities and personal freedom. The earlier master-slave relationship between husband and wife paved the way for a more dignified relationship based on the spirit of mutual love and respect.

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98. Chand, September 1931, pp. 620-21.
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  130. Kailash Rani Baatal, “Striyon Ka Mahtav Tatha Purushon Ka Kartavya”, Stree Darpan, December 1915. Baatal referred to those who treated women no better than domestic animals. Hukma Rani, “Ardhangini Ya Paon Ki Jooti”, March 1918; Kesari Devi, “Ashaant Grih”, July 1921. She accused men of treating women as “cattle”.
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  133. Om Prakash Aggarwal, “Aggarwal Bandhuau Tatha Anya Pathakgan -- Reply to a letter”, in Stree Darpan, May 1928.
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  137. These ideas are scattered in letters to the Editor, articles and poems, contributed by both male and female writers to Stree Darpan, 1911-28. For example, see Sant Charan Khanna, “Bharatiya Strian Aur Unke Sudhar”, January 1918. This article

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138. Rameshwari Nehru, "Stri Jati Aur Desh Ki Swadhinta", August, 1921.
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140. Smt. Hira Devi, "Stri Vrat", July 1910. In her articles, Kailash Rani Baatal, a regular contributor to Stree Darpan, often drew attention to the contradiction between the public postures and private behaviour of Indian men who flaunted the liberal ideal of "duties towards women" as rhetoric. Her article "Strion Ka Mahatava Tatha Purushaon Ka Kartavya", December 1915, was an eloquent articulation of these ideas. Uma Nehru, "Hamara Samajik Dhancha", April 1918.



## CHAPTER - III

### THE EMERGENCE OF THE INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS

#### I

It was on 28 December 1885 that the inaugural session of the Indian National Congress – originally known as the Indian National Union – took place in the Gokuldas Tejpal Sanskrit College and Boarding House in Mumbai. This day thus occupies an extremely significant place in the annals of Indian history.

It would be interesting to examine in brief the factors which led to the holding of this historic session. Sir Dinsha Wacha was one of the members of the first Congress session. He gave the following information through his granddaughter :

‘My grandfather, owing to his great age, has lost his memory somewhat, and is therefore unable to recall many things, but he has instructed me to write and let you know as much as he remembers.

The idea of the Indian National Congress originated with Hume, and not with Dadabhai Naoroji. The idea of a ‘National Assembly with a National Fund’ came from the public men of Calcutta, notable among whom was Mr. Kristodas Pal. Sir Dinsha cannot recall the name of Mr. Tarapada Banerji.<sup>1</sup>

Professor Sundar Raman was also one of the members of the first Congress. The following statement made by professor Raman gives an idea about the fluid political situation which was prevalent in India during those times :

‘While he was still at Simla, Mr. Hume paid frequent visits to the Viceroy, Lord Dufferin, who had just then arrived in India as successor to Lord Ripon. During one of those visits the conversation turned upon Mr. Hume’s aspiration for shaping and influencing English public opinion so as to start a movement for

India's political unity and regeneration. Mr. Hume's idea was to rouse the conscience of the people of England by carrying on a persistent agitation in Great Britain with the support and encouragement of leading friends of India, both among Englishmen and Scotsmen, whether or not officially connected with India. Lord Dufferin considered the question from a purely private sympathizer's point of view and expressed his opinion that such an agitation in England was foredoomed to failure, as all intelligent Englishmen were fully aware of the advantages of all kinds, economic, political, administrative, etc., which Great Britain derived from her huge and passive Dependency. He also convinced Mr. Hume that the latter could secure his own aims best by confining the agitation to India, for the present, and by making Indian public men all over the land start to organize and develop to its full strength a national organization in India itself, conducted with zeal and discretion by her own leaders under Mr. Hume's sympathetic and courageous lead.<sup>2</sup>

From the above statement one gets the impression that to a certain extent Lord Dufferin was the originator of the Congress. It may also be noted that in the year 1883, the ideal of holding a mass political agitation on an all-India basis had already become widespread.

We have seen that the Indian Association had carried on an all-India agitation regarding the Civil Service Memorial, and Surendranath's tour in northern India had brought the All-India idea still nearer. In the south the Madras Mahajana Sabha and in western India the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha had prepared the way for an All-India political platform. Ananda Mohan Bose's speech at the first National Conference in Calcutta prophesied a future Native Parliament.<sup>3</sup>

It would be interesting to note that after the annual convention of the Theosophical Society, Diwan Bahadur Raghunath Rao held an informal meeting with his friends with the purpose of finding out ways and means of motivating the Indian politicians to initiate a political movement with the ultimate aim of attaining swaraj. In

southern India people had started becoming increasingly aware about the political situation in the country, particularly after the inauguration of the Representative Assembly in 1881 by the Mysore State with the idea of inculcating in the minds of the masses the need to cooperate with the administration.

The Congress movement, according to Mr. A.O. Hume, “is only one outcome—though at the moment the most prominent and tangible – of the labours of a body of cultured men, mostly born natives of India, who, some years ago, banded themselves together to labour silently for the good of India”.<sup>4</sup> Mr Hume’s statement is well substantiated by a letter which Mr Tarapada Banerji (a Bengali lawyer) wrote :

‘In the first place, a public meeting ought to be convened in Calcutta as soon as possible...asking gentlemen from different parts of India to be present. With the consent of the majority, a general committee ought to be formed and representative men of all parts of India ought to be elected members’.<sup>5</sup>

He further proposed in no uncertain terms the need to appoint a management committee and a fund, with the following objects :

- ‘1. To have a permanent delegate in England to represent to our rulers there the true state of this country, and to agitate Indian questions.
2. To adopt suitable means for the purpose of imparting political education to the people of India and for this purpose to have a staff of ‘political missionaries’ whose duty would be, among other things, to establish People’s Associations, Shopkeepers’ Associations, and the like, wherever possible.
3. To encourage national trade and industry by annually awarding medals, prizes and certificates to inventors of mechanics of practical importance and to authors of treatises on Arts and Science, etc.
4. To adopt means for the creation of good feeling between the different religious sects of India’.<sup>6</sup>

Mr Banerji's letter is a clear reflection of the strong public opinion which favoured the formation of an organization on an all-India basis.

In another letter which Tarapada Banerji wrote to the Indian Mirror, he pointed out that the suggestion made by him had got a positive response from the Indian Association, and that the imprisonment of Surendranath Banerji had suggested to him that time was ripe for the creation of a National Fund and the formation of a National Assembly.<sup>7</sup>

The role played by Tarapada Banerji in the establishment of the Congress is reflected in the following letter of his which he wrote to one of his friends :

'You have inquired of me whether the movement in question (the Congress) is conducted on principles inculcated by me so far back as May 1883. I am afraid I must answer you in the negative. You may remember that before giving to the public a rough sketch of my plan, I wrote to several Associations and great men of the country to form a National Assembly and constitute a National fund. Notwithstanding that my country abounded in Associations and Sabhas, I advocated the formation of a National Assembly, as I thought that the existing Associations were not truly representative in their character and none of them could fulfil the object I had in view. I wanted two things, (1) A National Assembly, (2) A National Fund. To me they were like Purusa and Prakriti. A National Assembly without a National Fund is like an engineer without his instruments.<sup>8</sup>

While referring to the Congress, he made the following statement :

'In the year 1884, there was a National Conference in Calcutta. The Indian Association took advantage of the advent of the great men of the country on the occasion of the Exhibition. The next year, there was something more systematic. The people of Bombay succeeded in securing the attendance of some great men of the country. They called the gathering a National Congress'.<sup>9</sup>

Sir Dinsha Wacha had also stated that the idea of a National Assembly with a National Fund was mooted by the public leaders of Bengal, particularly Kristodas Pal. Tarapada's letters to the Indian Mirror also makes it amply clear that in 1883 an urgent need was felt by the leaders to form a Congress which would unite the educated Indians and bring them on a common platform.

This is not to detract from the important role played by Mr. Hume in the formation of the Congress. In fact it was Mr Hume who took the main initiative in the decision taken in March 1885 to convene a conference of the Indian National Union at Pune in the Christmas week of 1885. To quote Patabhi Sitarammaya :

Whatever the origin and whoever the originator of the idea, we come to this conclusion that the idea was in the air that the need of such an organization was being felt, that Mr Allan Octavian Hume took the initiative and that it was in March 1885, when the first notice was issued convening the first Indian National Union to meet at Poona in the following December, that what had been a vague idea floating generally in the air and influencing simultaneously the thoughts of thoughtful Indians in the North and the South, the East and the West assumed a definite shape and became a practical programme of action.<sup>10</sup>

Mr G.K. Gokhale was right when he said in London in 1913 that no Indian could have started the Indian National Congress. This is because if some Indians had tried to start it, the British officials would not have allowed it to come into existence. "If the founder of the Congress had not been a great Englishman and a distinguished ex-official, such was the distrust of political agitation in those days that the authorities would have at once found some way or the other of suppressing the movement".<sup>11</sup>

Mr A.O. Hume (1829-1912) came to India as a member of the civil service and spent a major part of his service career in district administration. His experience of serving during the uprising of 1857 in the North West Provinces, where much of the fighting took place, made him realize that there was an urgent need for a healthy interaction between the British administration and the Indian leaders. On his retirement from service in 1882, he placed before the British authorities the proposal for the

establishment of an association which would, in his own words, serve as “ a safety valve for the escape of great and growing forces”. According to Aruna Asaf Ali, “the Indian National Congress, which held its first session in Bombay in 1885, was the culmination of the parallel efforts of Surendranath Banerjea and Hume. What was intended as a safety valve became, over the years, a spring of national renewal and anti-imperialist mass mobilization”.<sup>12</sup>

There can be no denying that A.O. Hume played a dynamic role in the formation of the Indian National Congress. He has been rightly called “Father of the Congress”; but at the same time – as is evident from the above discussion – there were very important factors at work which led to the formation of the Congress. “Viewed in a larger context, the founding of the Indian National Congress was a response to the political and socio-economic conditions confronting the country as the inevitable outcome of its long subjection to alien rule”.<sup>13</sup>

## II

### Women in the Early Congress

In view of the fact that the Britishers were trying to capitalize on the deplorable position of women in Indian society, cultural nationalism became an important aspect in the anti-British struggle and the “woman question” came to occupy a significant position in the nationalist programme. Thus in the political controversy between the Indian National Congress and the British Raj, doubts were raised about the capacity of the Indians to govern their country. This was primarily because the apologists of the Raj expressed grave doubts about the commitment of the Indian leaders to bring about radical changes to better the lot of the suppressed sections of the society, particularly women’s low status. “It was in this context that the British utilised the subordinate situation of Indian women as an example of the backwardness of all Indians, not only to debunk nationalist claims for self rule but also to exploit the “condition of women” theme as a means to argue for the perpetual continuance of the Raj in India”.<sup>14</sup>

It may be recalled that prior to the formation of the Indian National Congress, the famous 19<sup>th</sup> century social reform movement had taken place; and because of the constant

references by the Britishers to the poor condition of women in India, the social evils like sati, purdah, female infanticide, child marriage, etc. became an important part of the agenda of the social reformers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century India. However, notwithstanding the condemnation of the social ills by the reformers, the fact remained that the issues of women sharing political power with men and equality between the sexes were not given due cognizance by the reformers. Besides, the issues of women's traditional roles and their economic dependence on others remained untouched.<sup>15</sup> Sumit Sarkar rightly points out that even though the social reformers were considerably influenced by the liberal, Western ideas, yet in their acceptance of liberal ideas, the reformers were extremely selective which is evident from the fact that the patriarchal norms within the family and the distinctions based on caste, etc. continued to exist.<sup>16</sup> The nationalists thus were faced with the uphill tasks of simultaneously defending the Indian culture and bettering the lot of women in Indian society. This was because the position of women was extremely crucial to India's preparedness for self-rule. The "woman question" was, however, so ticklish and complicated that the nationalists found it difficult to find an appropriate solution to it. Sivanath Sastri's frank admission that "women are fishbones in our throats; we cannot cough them up, and we dare not swallow them",<sup>17</sup> aptly reflects the dilemma in which the Indian nationalists were placed. It also points to the significance attached to the "woman question" in the nationalist endeavour.

It would be relevant in this context to refer to Partha Chatterjee's "nationalist resolution to the women's question"<sup>18</sup> which continues to hold sway even today. The crux of Chatterjee's argument is that as long as we take care to protect the spiritual superiority of our rich ancient cultural heritage, there would be no problem in making the necessary adjustment "to adapt ourselves to the requirements of a modern material world without losing our identity. This, indeed, was the key which the nationalists supplied for resolving the ticklish problems posed by the women's question in particular and the issues of social reform in general".<sup>19</sup>

Right since its inception the Indian National Congress had no reservations about women becoming its members. At its first session, A.O. Hume advised the political leaders representing different ideological belief to always keep in mind that "unless the elevation of the female element of the nation proceeds *pari passu* (with an equal pace)

with their work, all their labour for the political enfranchisement of the country will prove vain”.<sup>20</sup> Though there “was no woman delegate among those who entered their names in the register at the inauguration of the Indian National Congress”,<sup>21</sup> but as many as ten women attended the fourth session of the Congress at Mumbai in 1889. Like the men, the women participants also hailed from Calcutta and Mumbai.

Among the ten women who attended the fourth session was Swarnakumari Devi, Rabindranath’s sister, who had discarded the custom of purdah. She, along with her husband, brought out a Bengali Journal titled *Bharti* and in the process earned recognition as the first Indian woman editor. In 1886, she started a women’s association called “*Sakhi Samiti*” with the following objectives:

- (i) To promote friendly intercourse among Indian women and foster in them the growth of an active and enlightened interest in the welfare of the country;
- (ii) To provide a home for the education of poor girls to enable them to become useful members of the society;
- (iii) To prepare them for employment and to help the spread of women’s education by sending them out as zenana teachers.<sup>22</sup>

She was also the President of the women’s section of the Theosophical Society of Bengal in 1885-86. She attended the Indian National Congress as a delegate from Bengal in its session held at Calcutta in 1900. This was the first time that a woman had attended the session as a delegate. Eulogizing the services rendered by her in the public arena, Amiya Bhusan Basu wrote in the Calcutta Municipal Gazette: “Her early efforts in improving the conditions of womenfolk in Bengal when the outlook was gloomy and opposition was so strong reminded us of what Emerson said: ‘There is always room for a man of force and he makes room for many’.”<sup>23</sup>

Apart from being a social reformer, she also “wrote short stories, historical and social novels, dramas, lyrics, songs and poems, with equal success. She was a writer too, and nearly twenty-seven volumes stand in her name, not including the text books she wrote. She was also associated with the board of editors of the ‘*Bharati*’ from its very beginning, contributing liberally to it”.<sup>24</sup>



Kadambini Ganguli from Bengal who had the distinction of being the first woman doctor of Bengal, also attended the session.

Among the other women present were Pandita Ramabai, Mrs. Shevantibai Trimbak, Mrs. Shantabai Nikambe, Mrs. Kashibai Kanitkar and Miss Manekjee Cursetjee, all of whom developed into renowned educationists and social reformers. There were Hindu, Brahmo, Parsi and Christian women representatives. Pandita Ramabai came on behalf of the Arya Mahila Samaj, Poona, and Swarnakumari Devi had been chosen to represent the Bengal Ladies Association. Swarnakumari Devi and Kadambini Ganguli attended the Congress session as delegates in 1890; the latter had the honour of being the first woman to speak from the Congress platform when she proposed a vote of thanks to the President, Pherozeshah Mehta.<sup>25</sup>

The fiery spirit of Swarnakumari found support in her daughter Saraladevi Chaudhurani, who apart from being an eminent social reformer and educationist was also a nationalist to the core. She was the niece of the great poet Rabindranath and was born in the year 1872. In 1897, she took over as the Editor of *Bharati*.<sup>26</sup> Through the columns of this Journal she advocated Hindu-Muslim unity. She “composed a song urging the people of different provinces of the country to join the freedom struggle and trained a group of over fifty girls to sing this song in chorus at the Congress Session in 1901”.<sup>27</sup>

However, despite the contributions made by the women mentioned above, it would be fair to say that in the early stages of the Congress, the women who participated like Kadambini Ganguli and Swarnakumari Devi, were there mainly because of their husbands, rather than “as representatives of any constituency in their own rights”. They placed before the Congress no demands and did not express their own independent opinion. They were thus token, rather than full-fledged political, participants. Moreover, in view of the consideration that the Congress proceedings were conducted in English, most Indian women would not have been able to identify themselves with these. The constraints of physical mobility, financial resources and knowledge of English were

factors which discouraged the middle-class women to actively associate themselves with the Congress in its early stages. Significantly, out of a hundred delegates who participated in the 1904 session, only 20 were women.<sup>28</sup> But at the Benares Congress Session of 1905, as many as 600 women representing different parts of the country assembled with the purpose of “demonstration of female solidarity across India and the mobilisation of women’s support for the nationalist movement”.<sup>29</sup>

Thus notwithstanding the fact that women’s role in the early stages of the Congress was symbolic rather than whole-hearted involvement, yet their very presence at Congress sessions served as a big source of inspiration for women of future generations who were more actively involved in the national movement.

### III.

#### **Women in the Swadeshi Movement, 1904-11**

##### *Partition of Bengal*

Seeing the Muslims in a state of frustration after the destruction of the Mughal Empire, the British decided to garner Muslim support by offering preferential treatment to them in government employment. On 24<sup>th</sup> February 1886, an English official wrote a letter to the Viceroy, Lord Dufferin, the extract of which is given below:

I am confident that it will bear good fruits; indeed it seems to have done so already, by the complete abstention of the Mohammedans from Brahmin and Baboo agitation. It will be a great matter to sweeten our relations with this portion of the Indian population, the bravest and at one time the most dangerous. They all with one voice declare that they got their whipping in 1857, and they take it like men. They now look to us alone, not to be subject to Hindu domination.<sup>30</sup>

Muslims, in general, were apprehensive that democracy based on representative-government would lead to the Hindu domination and would be detrimental to their interests. Thus in 1903, Lord Curzon, the then Viceroy, initiated the plan for the partition of Bengal with the idea of capitalizing on the feelings of apprehensions of the Muslims.

Ostensibly aimed at improving administrative efficiency by reorganising an unwieldy province, the partition scheme was in fact designed to separate Bengali Muslims from Bengali Hindus. Of the 18 annual sessions of the Congress held from 1885 to 1902, four (the maximum at any one centre) had been hosted by Calcutta. Bengali leaders had presided over six of the sessions held outside Calcutta. The Bengali presence was thus conspicuous on the state of Indian nationalism. Curzon decided to strike where, as he thought, it would hurt most.<sup>31</sup>

Lord Curzon had absolutely no reservations in regard to his policy of encouraging Muslim separatism as the evident from his address to a gathering at Dacca in Muslim-majority East Bengal:

‘When a proposal is put forward which would make Dacca the centre and possibly the capital of a new and self-sufficing administration; which must give to the people of these districts by reason of their numerical strength and their superior culture, the preponderating voice in the province so created; which would invest the Mohammedans in Eastern Bengal with a unity which they have not enjoyed since the days of old Mussalman viceroys and kings; which must develop local interests and trade to a degree that is impossible so long as you remain the appendage of another administration -- and it be that the people of these districts are to be advised by their leaders to sacrifice all these great advantages from fear? Do you mean to be so blind to your future as to repudiate the offer?’<sup>32</sup>

The final decision to partition Bengal was announced by the Govt. on 20 July 1905. Though organized political agitation had commenced with the formation of the Congress, it is the Swadeshi or the anti-partition movement which

...marks a veritable watershed in the annals of Indian struggle for emancipation from the British yoke. Triggered by the Curzonian decision to partition Bengal in 1905, the movement, though provincial in origin, was broadly national in content

and eventually assumed all-India dimensions in the depth of its impact. Unless one is inclined to be unduly pedantic, it may be conceded that the Swadeshi struggle witnessed the culmination of the 'political mendicancy' of the Moderates and the inauguration of the 'militant nationalism' of the Extremists with which it was hence forward, increasingly replaced. The days of mere petitioning were now over; the era of direct action had arrived. Indeed, the boycott and Swadeshi called forth by the partition of Bengal provoked an upheaval of an unprecedented nature and generated a tremendous enthusiasm.<sup>33</sup>

### *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal*

According to Bharati Ray, the Swadeshi movement was motivated by the "urge of the aspiring Bengali elite to break the system of British monopoly capitalism and to create new opportunities for their own participation in the commercial and industrial fields".<sup>34</sup> The name Swadeshi suggests that the basic idea behind the movement was to boycott British goods and to encourage indigenous manufacturing and production. In sharp contrast to the earlier association in which only the elite class participated, new associations like village samitis and constructive Swadeshi organizations came into being with the aim of mobilizing the common masses through traditional themes.

The Swadeshi movement of Bengal was greatly similar to the non-cooperation campaign initiated by Mahatma Gandhi in later years. As Sumit Sarkar remarks:

There was first what may be termed 'constructive Swadeshi' the rejection of futile and 'mendicant' policies in favour of self-help through Swadeshi industries, national schools and attempts at village improvement and organisation ... In all this there were clear anticipations of much of the later Gandhian programme of Swadeshi, national schools and constructive village work.<sup>35</sup>

However, despite the similarity, the Swadeshi Movement of Bengal was fundamentally different from that of Gandhi's in that it laid no special emphasis on non-violence.

In order to make the Swadeshi movement successful, Bengali men sought the help of women. And in the process they took care not to conjure up a foreign model of

womanhood.<sup>36</sup> Also, there were any other factors which facilitated the participation of women in the Swadeshi Movement. For example, the wide circulation of patriotic pamphlets written in vernacular Bengali. Particularly striking was a pamphlet titled “A Vow for Bengali Women” written by Ramendra Sunder Trivedi. The language of this pamphlet was so lucid and simple that rural women could understand it easily. It urged women to take part in Swadeshi rituals of Rakhi Bandhan (exchange of wristlets among Bengalis) and Arandhan (not lighting cooking fires) and to shun foreign goods. Another important factor was the penning of patriotic songs by the likes of Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo Ghose and Rajani Kant Sen. These songs became so popular among the women that they felt greatly inspired to take part in the Swadeshi movement. Above all, the publication of a large number of articles in women’s Journals like Bambodhini Patrika, Bharatmahila, Antahpur and Jahanabi went a long way in moulding the attitudes and ideas of women. “Nirad Chaudhuri has recalled how his parents decided to put away the children’s foreign-made clothes and buy Indian-made outfits. Later, in 1909, his mother took a sudden and violent dislike to a glass water pitcher that survived the swadeshi movement and ordered one of her sons to smash it”.<sup>37</sup>

Among the direct women participants in the Swadeshi movement, the name of Saraladevi Chaudhurani (b.1872) stands out prominently. She played an important role in the formation of youth groups. She was of the firm belief that young men and women could contribute to the cause of the national movement in a much better way if they were blessed with good health and robust physique.

She, therefore, formed her akhra (a physical fitness club) and Byayam samiti (gymnasium) which also provided links with biplabis (revolutionaries). In 1902 she introduced Birashtami Utsav which was followed by Udayaditya Utsav (named after the Hindu zamindar of Jessore) – festivals to celebrate physical prowess and valour. On these occasions young Bengali men displayed their skill with the sword and the lathi (stick), and paid homage to Bengali heroes. Sarala argued that people in Bengal were impressed by the heroic tales of Rajput leaders, but tended to forget their own heroes. After her marriage with Rambhuj Datta Chaudhuri of Lahore, she worked to spread the gospel of nationalism in the

Punjab, edit the Bengali journal *Bharati*, and maintain her close links with the *Suhrid Samiti* of Mymensingh, a secret revolutionary society founded in 1900.<sup>38</sup>

An important aspect of the Swadeshi movement was the donation of jewellery by some women to the national fund. Mrs J.K. Ganguli, for instance, donated her bracelet to facilitate the paying of the fine imposed on Durga Mohan Sen who had been convicted for seditious activities. Also, a number of women in Barisal did not hesitate in offering their savings to the *Swadeshi Bandhab Samiti*.<sup>39</sup>

Apart from Saraladevi, there were other women also in Calcutta and mofussil towns who took part in the Swadeshi movement. Hemantakumari Choudhury (b. 1868), who was the editor of the well-known Hindi journal titled *Antahpur* from 1901 to 1904 took part in the movement. She later came under the influence of Gandhi. She was known for delivering fiery speeches and organizing meetings. Lilabati Mitra (b. 1864) and her husband Krishnakumar Mitra, the editor of *Sanjivani*, also contributed to the Swadeshi movement. Labanyaprabha Datta (b. 1888) joined the Swadeshi movement and pleaded with her husband and family members to abandon the use of foreign goods. She subsequently courted arrest during the Civil Disobedience movement in the 1930s. Snehashila Choudhury (b. 1886) organized women's meetings where she delivered fiery speeches with the purpose of convincing women to stop wearing imported bangles and to substitute them by wearing *sankha* (indigenous bangles).<sup>40</sup> She later became a women leader of eminence at Khulna in rural Bengal.

The day on which actual partition of Bengal took place – 16 October 1905 – women throughout Bengal registered their strong protest.<sup>41</sup>

Five hundred women gathered in Calcutta to watch the foundation of the Federation Hall: a fair number assembled at Ramendrasundar Trivedi's house at Murshidabad to listen to the patriotic composition, *Bangalakshmir Bratakatha*, read out to them by his daughter, Girija Debi. In Dacca, Ashalata Sen (b. 1894), a girl of eleven, under the inspiration of her grandmother Nabashashi Debi, went from house to house persuading women to join the swadeshi cause. In Barisal,

Manorama Basu, a young housewife, led a procession of women on the streets, defying all traditional norms of womanly behaviour.<sup>42</sup>

Subsequently, in April 1906, two hundred women attended the Provincial Conference at Barisal.<sup>43</sup> Sanjivini and other newspapers<sup>44</sup> reported meetings of women in Calcutta, Dacca, Barisal, Chittagong, Mymensingh and Khulna in support of the Swadeshi movement. The Bamabodhini Patrika reported: "Women like men are organising meetings in towns as well as villages to express sorrow at the partition of Bengal, and are taking the swadeshi vows. At several meetings women are coming forward to inspire men, while at home they are initiating their sons, brothers and husbands to the worship of the motherland".<sup>45</sup>

Women's journals also played a big role by publicizing swadeshi brands like "Bengal Chemicals", "New Floral Hair Oil" and "Oriental Soap", manufactured by the Oriental Soap Factory. "The entire emphasis was on the indigenous character of the goods, for example, 'manufactured entirely with Bengal's capital and Bengal's labour'.<sup>46</sup>

It may be noted that the Swadeshi movement did not remain confined to Bengal; it later became popular in a number of provinces like Punjab, Maharashtra and Madras. In Punjab, it was Sushila Devi of Sialkot who motivated the women political activists to follow the Swadeshi spirit through a series of lectures. Another woman, whose name stands out prominently as one of the political activists was Har Devi, the wife of Roshan Lal, the famous social reformer and the editor of a Hindi magazine, Bharat Bhagni. Har Devi's main contribution was organizing various meetings and collecting funds to support the nationalist workers who were under trial.<sup>47</sup>

Women workers of the Arya Samaj also did not lag behind in contributing their humble mite by way of infusing the nationalist spirit among women in Punjab. Smt. Purani, a dedicated Arya Samajist from Hissar, visited various districts of Punjab to make the concept of Swadeshi popular among the Punjabi women. She was vehemently opposed to the caste system and tried to impress upon the women the need to "bring up their sons not with a view to joining government service, but to an independent participation in trade, especially the manufacture and sale of Swadeshi".<sup>48</sup>

Apart from the women mentioned above who directly participated in the Swadeshi movement, there were other women also who contributed to the Swadeshi cause through indirect participation. "Direct participation was not feasible for women in the biplabi (revolutionary) movement that broke out during the last phase of the swadeshi movement. Women were not included initially in the samitis or revolutionary associations; the prevailing ideology of the time was too conservative and the risks too formidable to allow women to participate on an equal basis with men".<sup>49</sup> The women who gave indirect support to the biplabis are as follows: Saraladevi Chaudhurani and Sister Nivedita maintained close contacts with the biplabis; Kumudini Mitra organized a group of committed brahmin women to communicate messages to the biplabis; Mataji Tapaswini, the founder of Mahakali Pathasala, threw the gates of her school open to a secret society called Banga Dharma Sammilan where political extremists used to organize secret meetings.<sup>50</sup> Women from the middle-class families too helped the biplabis by giving them shelter and by providing a hiding place to their firearms.<sup>51</sup> "Saudamini Debi of Faridpur, Sarojini Debi, Priyabala Debi and Mrinalini Debi of Barisal, Brahmomoyee and Chinmoyee Sen of Dacca are but a few names of the women (about whom not much is known) who rendered such help to the biplabis".<sup>52</sup>

An important incident which deserves a mention here is the execution of Kanailal Datta who had killed Naren Goswami (because he had proved to be a traitor by turning an approver) in the premises of the Alipore Jail (1908). The deep respect shown by women for Datta was particularly striking. At the time of his funeral, they assembled in large numbers to have a last glimpse of him and chanted: "Blessed is Kanai, and blessed is Kanai's mother".<sup>53</sup> Seeing this sort of spontaneous demonstration by women, the Britishers decided "that in order to curb the growth of sedition among women, the recording of swadeshi songs on gramophone discs should be proscribed and the plays performed in theatre halls, which were frequented by ladies, be censored".<sup>54</sup>

Though the Swadeshi movement did not bring about awakening of women on a mass scale, yet the Swadeshi era went a long way in paving the way for the future participation of women on a big scale in the ongoing national movement. Women's participation in the Swadeshi era was so conspicuous that even foreign dignitaries did not fail to notice it. Ramsay Macdonald's wife, who was in India during this period, referred



to the “tremendous movement going on amongst the women. We are fond of labelling the Indian aspirations as sedition when if they were amongst ourselves we should call them patriotic. This movement seems to be spreading as much amongst women as amongst men”.<sup>55</sup> The Daily Telegraph of London also reported that the Bengali ladies were “the most obstinate and most dangerous antagonists of the English”.<sup>56</sup>

#### IV

### **Home Rule for India : Annie Besant's Role**

The next important event to have taken place in the history of the national movement and women's resurgence was the formation of the Home Rule League in 1916, credit for which goes to Annie Besant. The period 1914-18 is of great significance in the national movement also because it was for the first time that a woman led the movement. Annie Besant “... wrenched Indian politics out of its automatic and placid theorising, made it a living and vital issue before the country and the whole empire ...”.<sup>57</sup> In fact, it was due to the efforts made by Annie Besant that an organized movement for the women's emancipation and to place before the authorities the demand for the political rights for women came into being. Her leadership qualities served as a source of inspiration for women of India who felt motivated to take part in the national movement in large numbers. In the words C.M. Reddi: “Dr. A. Besant prepared the ground for the Gandhian freedom movement in which women have played a prominent part”.<sup>58</sup> Indeed the starting of the Home Rule League and the Home Rule agitation provided a fresh impetus to the freedom struggle.

Born in London on 1 October 1847, Annie Besant first came to India in November 1893. During the course of her stay in India, she was greatly influenced by India's rich cultural heritage and spiritual knowledge. Soon after being elected President of the International Theosophical Society following the death of Col. Olcott, she started staying in Adyar, in Madras, on a permanent basis. She also became the first woman President of the Indian National Congress in 1917.

During the first two decades of her stay in India, her activities were largely confined to the areas of education, social reform and Theosophy.<sup>59</sup> Annie Besant associated herself with Sanatan Dharm Palani Sabha, Benaras, founded by Col. Olcott – one of the founders of the Theosophical Society – with the object of “improving the morals of Hindu students and of engendering a love for Aryan simplicity and Aryan spirituality.”<sup>60</sup> She also associated herself with the Arya Bala Bodhini, a monthly journal in English, which was sold at a nominal rate of Re 1/- per annum. The aim of this journal was “restore to India her past greatness in her religion which is her only life and strength”.<sup>61</sup>

Annie Besant also raised her voice against the social ills like caste system, child marriage and untouchability. Speaking about untouchability, she said : “You complain, and justly, of the harsh and rude manners often shown to you by your English rulers, but are they one-hundredth part as insolent to you as you are insolent to this race whom you in the past have brought under your yoke”.<sup>62</sup>

The education imparted to the Indians totally based on Western cultural values was not to her liking. Her idea of education was that it should be “founded on Indian ideals and enriched not dominated by thought and culture of the West”.<sup>63</sup> In 1897 she began devoting herself to the betterment of the Hindu College at Benaras. The result of her persevering efforts was that it took the shape of full-fledged college in about two years. Through the patronage of this college, she started bringing out publications on Hindu religious thought and philosophy under the title Sanatan Dharm Series. She also started schools and colleges exclusively for girls. A few examples are: Central Hindu Girls School, Benaras; Madanapalla High School and College; and Adyar National College.<sup>64</sup>

It would, however, be interesting to note that Annie Besant who, initially, was an ardent votary of the principle of equality for both the sexes and who had also made her views very clear on this subject in England subsequently developed different ideas on the subject. She stopped fighting for absolute equality for girls and felt that they should contribute to society in a way different from boys. The girl “must be educated as the wife and mother, not as the rival competitor of man in all forms of outside and public employment”.<sup>65</sup>

To give a concrete shape to her social reform programme, in 1906 Annie Besant organized within the Theosophical Society two distinct associations named “Sons of India” and “Daughters of India”. Subsequently, in 1913, she established a new organization named “Theosophical Stalwarts”. Each member of this organization was required to completely dissociate himself from certain customs. In the following year, it took the shape of “Brothers of Service” who totally disregarded all sorts of discriminations based on caste and creed.

Annie Besant also took up the cause of swadeshi, but her interpretation was based on economic considerations. The Intelligence Department, however, took this as political propaganda.<sup>66</sup> The special feature about her lectures in 1909 was that she discouraged students from taking part in politics. She was of the opinion that reforms should be gradual and not sudden, and that India was not prepared for self-government at that point of time, and that universal suffrage should be made applicable only in municipal matters.<sup>67</sup>

In 1911, Annie Besant organized yet another organization and gave it the name “Order of the Rising Star”. This was established with the basic objective of “protection of the soul, for the destruction of the evil doers for the sake of firmly establishing righteousness”. “In 1913 a junior branch of the “Order of the Rising Star” was established entitled “The Servants of the Star”. It consisted of people below twenty-one years of age. Its membership was open to those who wished to be trained in the special kind of service which the spirit of the new age demanded. The membership of the Order upto 31<sup>st</sup> March 1916, was 5,547 and that of the Servants 1,400. The total membership of Brothers of the Stars in May 1917 was 16,476 including the Servants 8,999<sup>\*</sup>.<sup>68</sup>

However, despite being involved in social and educational activities, she kept herself abreast with the existing political situation in India. She was of the firm belief that “India must be governed on the basis of Indian feelings, Indian traditions, Indian thoughts, and Indian ideals”.<sup>69</sup> Besant was particularly interested in the education of Indian women and had tried to bring about an awareness in them in regard to their social and political rights.<sup>70</sup> She began to realize that no substantial improvement could be brought about without raising the political status of India. In 1913 circumstances were such that she felt constrained to consider taking the plunge into active politics. She

observed: "It is possible that I should have never jumped into political work, had not increasing repression by the authority, narrowing of liberty, the ill-treatment of students, and the danger of revolution forced me into the field".<sup>71</sup> Thus she joined the Congress in 1914 and her entry into politics, as Sitaramayya observes, "Brought new ideas, new talents, new resources and altogether a new method of organisation and a new outlook into the field of Congress".<sup>72</sup>

Her interest in the political situation of India could be traced to the year 1878 when she brought out a pamphlet (on England, India and Afghanistan) in which she registered her strong resentment against the invasion of Afghanistan. In 1902 while she was in England, she held the British government responsible for the pathetic condition of the Indian people. She wondered if the British had "... a right to rule 30,00,00,000 of people in name and not understand the alphabet of Indian question very largely in your Imperial Parliament".<sup>73</sup> She further observed, that "India is not ruled for the prospering of her people but rather for the profit of her conquerors and her sons are being treated as the conquered race".<sup>74</sup> She also criticized the British for the destruction of the manufacture goods of India for the profit of Lancashire. As already stated she was firm in her belief that India should be governed on the basis of Indian ideals.<sup>75</sup> In order to give a concrete shape to her ideals, she started making efforts to revive the village councils which she thought was necessary if local self-government was to be successful.

Annie Besant's political career truly began when she gave a political lecture at Madurai in January 1914 which was presided over by the municipal Chairman. During the same year the First World War broke out. Annie Besant took a keen interest in the war by urging people to contribute to the war loan. She herself succeeded in motivating about six hundred recruits for the defence force.<sup>76</sup>

The idea of Home Rule which was already there in her subconscious mind began to manifest when she asked for self-government "not as a reward but as a right".<sup>77</sup> To quote her:

... there had been talk of a reward due to India's loyalty, but India does not chaffer with the blood of her sons and proud tears of her daughters in exchange for so much liberty, so much right. India claims the right as a nation, to justice

among the people of the Empire. India asked for this before the war, India asks for it during the War, India will ask for it after the War, but not as a reward but as a right does she ask for it, on that there must be no mistake.<sup>78</sup>

In order to make her mission of Home Rule popular, she started publishing a weekly review titled *The Commonwealth* w.e.f. 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1914. This paper propagated the ideas of “religions liberty, national education, social reform and political reform” with the ultimate purpose of establishing a self-government for India within the British Commonwealth. In the very first issue of the *Commonwealth*, she spelt out her political aims in no unambiguous terms :

In political reforms we aim at the building up of complete self-government from village council through district and municipal boards and provincial legislative assemblies to a national parliament, equal in its powers by whatever name they may be called, also at the direct representation of Imperial Parliament, when that body shall contain representatives of the self-governing States of the Empire.<sup>79</sup>

She delivered a number of speeches at Nagpur in 1915 during the course of which she elaborated her concept of self-government :

... that the country shall have a government by the Councils, elected by all the people, with the power of the purse and the government is responsible to the House. There should be elected element in the Imperial Council, the holders of portfolios should be responsible to the elected House. The Provincial Parliament shall also be elected with ministry responsible to the Parliament and that the Governor would act as the King acts in England. In the district Councils and Taluqas and in Municipalities and in village Panchayats – the one need is elected element who shall be responsible to the electorate which places them where they are.<sup>80</sup>

During April 1914 Annie Besant visited England with the object of forming an Indian party, in Parliament. Her efforts, however, were not rewarded with success. But she did succeed in making her ideas popular in England through her public speeches. After returning to India, Annie Besant felt the necessity of having a publishing firm of her own. She thus bought a daily paper in Madras called Madras Standard and got herself registered as the sole proprietor, publisher and printer. She later renamed the paper as New India which was aimed primarily “to press forward the coming changes in India and to claim steadily India’s place in the Empire”.<sup>81</sup> Through this paper she made her intentions of leading a political campaign in favour of Swaraj clear. The Director of the Criminal Investigation Department observed that her methods “were highly objectionable as they inevitably led to inflaming racial feelings”.<sup>82</sup> Support the Home Rule, she said : “The fate of British Empire hangs on the fate of India and therefore it is but wisdom and prudence to keep India contented by granting Home Rule to her”. India was “a tremendous reservoir of manpower, far greater than America and home ruled India was an asset to the Empire in the struggle against German militarism”.<sup>83</sup>

On 25 September 1915, Annie Besant made a formal announcement of her intentions to start a Home Rule League with the basic objective of “Home Rule for India”. Home Rule for India was considered essential because “It is the birth right of every nation, and secondly, because, her most important interests are now made subservient to the interest of the British Empire without her consent and her resources are not utilized for her greater needs”.<sup>84</sup> Also, “Self-government is necessary for the self-respect and dignity of a people, other government emasculates a nation, lowers its character and lessens its capacity”.<sup>85</sup>

Annie Besant envisaged a Home Rule League as “an auxiliary to the Indian National Congress and moved a resolution to that effect in the Bombay Congress of December, 1915”.<sup>86</sup> The Moderates felt apprehensive that a new organization might weaken the Congress. They thus thwarted her attempts of making the Congress accept the Home Rule idea. A decision was taken for the preparation of a draft proposal by the All India Congress Working Committee in consultation with other bodies. Annie Besant agreed to abide by the decision of the Committee and postponed the formation of the League. She, however, announced that in the event Congress failed to come out with a

scheme in respect of Self-Government for India by 1<sup>st</sup> September 1916, she would feel constrained to go ahead with her programme of launching the Home Rule League sans the Congress.

As was expected the Congress did not come out with any such draft proposal by 1 September 1916, and Annie Besant went ahead with the formation of the Home Rule League on a formal basis. The inauguration of the League took place in September 1916. The popularity of the Home Rule League can be gauged from the fact that within a few days branches were established at Bombay, Kanpur, Allahabad, Varanasi, Mathura, Calicut, Ahmadnagar, Madras, and so on. "While Annie Besant felt bound by her pledge to Moderate leaders, Tilak was under no such constraint since he was outside the Congress fold and consequently, he had, in April 1916 launched an Indian Home Rule League at a conference of the Extremists from Maharashtra, the Central Provinces and Berar at Belgaum".<sup>87</sup>

Annie Besant made it clear that in establishing the Home Rule League her struggle was not directed against Great Britain, but for liberty within the Empire.<sup>88</sup> In fact she wanted to bring India and Great Britain closer as is evident from the following statement: "One thing that lives very near to our heart is to draw Great Britain and India nearer to each other by making known in Great Britain something of Indian Movements and of the men who will influence from here the destinies of the Empire".<sup>89</sup>

The objectives of the League were :

- (i) To secure self-government for India through law-abiding and constitutional activities, i.e., agitation and propaganda, the constitutional way being the best way to political evolution.
- (ii) To maintain connection with Great Britain by becoming a free nation within the Empire under the Imperial Crown of His Majesty, the King Emperor George V, and his successor.
- (iii) To support and strengthen the National Congress, which had laboured for thirty years, to lay the foundation of Indian self-government.
- (iv) To carry out continuous educative propaganda on the necessity of Home Rule for India.<sup>90</sup>

The Home Rule League was popularized through the press, public meetings and lectures, and distribution of handbills and pamphlets. The idea was to educate and awaken the people. While Tilak's Home League was popular in Maharashtra and Karnataka where it had a big following, Annie Besant's Home League operated in the rest of India. "It had notable success in Sind among the Amil trading caste, and in Gujarat among the Bania traders. Both Sind and Gujarat were 'backwaters' as far as institutional politics were concerned. Numerous branches of her league also mushroomed in Bihar and the UP; again regions with comparatively little influences in Congress"<sup>91</sup>. "Tilak's League claimed a membership of over 32,000 while at its height in mid-1917 Besant's League had 27,000 members; and collectively, as Judith Brown confirms, 'by the end of 1917, their joint membership numbered about 60,000'. In addition there was a massive distribution of propagandist literature. Tilak's League in its first year sold 47,000 copies of six Marathi and two English pamphlets and Besant's organisation had already brought out 3,00,000 copies of 26 English tracts by September 1916"<sup>92</sup>.

The Home Rule League became popular not only among the Western educated Indians, but also among the common masses, posing in the process a big challenge to the British regime. The acting Chief Secretary to the Government of Madras informed the Home Secretary, Government of India, on 17 November 1916 that :

The activities of the Home Rule League continue. Special Home Rule classes have been started and are to be held twice a week in the hall of the Young Man's Indian Association and Madras; the first meeting was taken by a number of the Theosophical Society under the presidency of Mrs. Besant herself, the attendance being variously reported at from 70 to 120. The influence of the Organizing Secretary, Mr. Arundale, is undoubtedly on the increase and his name is mooted as possible political successor to Mrs. Besant . . . Attention is being concentrated on the student classes . . . This is not matter for surprise seeing that students and school boys read New India regularly, study Mrs. Besant's political pamphlets and attend Home Rule classes and lectures laying special stress on the great part



which the youths of today will play in the future of India. The bad effect which this has on discipline extends outside Madras; it has been specially noticed at St. Joseph's college, Trichinopoly and in the College at Coimbatore where notices inviting the readers to 'kill the English' and to 'worship Mrs. Besant' were recently found posted up on the College gates.<sup>93</sup>

On 18 December 1916, an official report from Madras stated :

While Annie Besant and her lieutenants pay particular attention to the student class, there are indications of the initiation of a special campaign for village work based mainly on the distribution of vernacular pamphlets and the itineration of Home Rule preachers. Hitherto the district reports have for the most part pictured the Home rule Movement as confined to younger vakils and students in central towns. But in the report from the Guntur district for the past fortnight the Collector lays stress upon the activities of the League in the delta villages of the Tenali Taluk. New India, he writes, owing to its cheapness, has a very wide circulation in rural areas generally and the fact, in his opinion, is giving the Home Rule Movement a marked impetus among English knowing people of all classes; the paper has a specially large circulation in the lower ranks of government service .<sup>94</sup>

On 17 January 1917, the Home member of the Government of India wrote : "The position is one of great difficulty. Moderate leaders can command no support among the vocal classes who are being led at the heels of Tilak and Besant".<sup>95</sup> Later, the Viceroy, who realized the gravity of the situation, suggested to the Secretary of State that there was an urgent need for the British Government to declare its policy. He wrote that Annie Besant, Tilak and others

... are fomenting with great vigour the agitation for immediate Home Rule, and in the absence of any definite announcement by the Government of India as to their policy in the matter, it is stressing many of those who hitherto have held less advanced views. The agitation is having a mischievous effect on public feeling

throughout the country. Consistent and malicious attacks on the system and method of present administration are aggravating the danger.<sup>96</sup>

The Government ultimately decided that if the two main Home Rule Leaders could be muzzled, the movement would die a natural death. In June 1917 the Madras Government interned Annie Besant along with her colleagues G.S. Arundale and B.P. Wadia. News of her internment caused widespread resentment. To quote Anne Taylor :

Her internment began on 15 June when she left her 'dear rooms at Adyar', over a path strewn with flowers, for the hill station at Ootacamund, one of six alternatives Pentland offered her. 'Ooty' depressed her from the start. 'Not an Indian name did I see on the gate pillars', she wrote in the diary she began to keep (probably with an eye to publication), 'it was all Brown, Jones and Robinson, a colony of foreigners'. The weather was 'horrible': rain and bitter cold instead of the warmth of the plains, a contrast she did not hesitate to bring to the attention of the authorities (it was the hottest time of year in Madras when she was usually in England). She paced the verandah of the bungalow: twenty-four steps each way; eighty turns to get warm. She described her gaolers as men of the characteristic Teutonic type, given to vulgar boasting over a fallen foe; spiteful, inefficient. As a symbol of defiance she hoisted the red and green flag she had designed for the Congress on a pole in the garden and, at night, a lantern.

News of her internment provoked a huge wave of indignation: 'Everyone is on a soap box gesticulating', Lutyens's assistant wrote to him from Delhi. Before the end of June there were twenty-eight protest meetings in Madras, twelve in Bombay. The Home Rule movement was spreading rapidly, the Chief Commissioner of the Central Provinces warned the Viceroy; he had never known such feeling. He thought the people were not so much concerned about Besant as impatient with the Government for its delay in announcing reform. The Extremists scented victory: something must be done. Indian politicians, who had been less than enthusiastic about Besant, now swung in behind Home Rule. The

Nehrus, father and son, went into action in the north, while Jinnah took charge in Bombay.<sup>97</sup>

Jawaharlal Nehru wrote a spirited letter in which he “called for non-cooperation with the British authorities in place of the politics of petitioning”.<sup>98</sup> He stated :

Are we going to indulge in mere protests and representations as we have done for so many weary years? ...Ours have been the politics of cowards and opium-eaters long enough and it is time we thought and acted like live men and women who place the honour and interests of their country above the frowns and smiles of every Tom, Dick and Harry who has I.C.S. attached to his name. Let us make it clear to the powers that be that we will not tolerate this highhandedness, and as long as and until they do not retrace their steps, there shall be no cooperation between the people and the Government. Every one of us who holds an honorary position under the Government should resign it and refuse to have anything to do with the bureaucracy. I am aware that many will not be prepared to do this... Of the likes of such we have no need, we want no faint hearts or wobblers in the Home Rule League... The wheat will be all the purer when the chaff is removed.<sup>99</sup>

According to S.R. Mehrotra, the internment of Besant “was the signal for a countrywide protest. Instead of crushing the movements, as the government had obviously hoped, the internment of Annie Besant and her colleagues provided a powerful impetus to it. Many leading Indians, including Moderates, who had so far held aloof from her Home Rule League, now joined it and its membership doubled”.<sup>100</sup> Thus, the internment of Besant made her followers even more firm in their resolution to fight the Government. Annie Besant was eventually released in September 1917 – a period when her eminence had spread far and wide.

In order to encourage women’s participation, the Home Rule League set up special women’s branches. On the participation of women in the Home Rule movement, Annie Besant remarked :

The strength of the Home Rule movement is rendered tenfold greater by the adhesion to it of large numbers of women, who bring to its helping the uncalculating heroism, the endurance, the self-sacrifice of the feminine nature. Our League's best recruits and recruiters are among the women of India, and the women of Madras boast that they marched in procession when the men were stopped and that their prayers in the temples set the interned captives free. Home Rule has become intertwined with religion.... That is, in this country, the surest way of winning alike the women of the higher classes and the men and women villagers. And that is why I have said that the two words, 'Home Rule', have become a Mantram (an incantation charged with power.)<sup>101</sup>

The internment of Annie Besant was a big factor in the active association of women in politics. To register their protest, patriots like Margaret Cousins organized processions by women. Besant's internment thus "played a prominent part in rousing the spirit of women and awakening them from their lethargy into active participation in the women's movement".<sup>102</sup>

Annie Besant's growing popularity was rewarded with her being elected as the first woman President of the Indian National Congress in December 1917. She made the following statement in her Presidential address :

While I was humiliated, you crowned me with honour; ...while I was crushed under the heel of bureaucratic power, you acclaimed me as your leader; while I was silenced and unable to defend myself, you defended me, and won for me release. I was proud to serve in lowliest fashion, but you lifted me up and placed me before the world as your chosen representative.<sup>103</sup>

This big event "further cemented the bond between the women's movement and the struggle for freedom".<sup>104</sup>

The 1917 Calcutta session of the Congress was indeed a big occasion for women as they came to occupy for the first time a dominant position in the Congress. Apart from

Annie Besant who held the coveted post of the President, two other women graced the occasion by their august presence -- on Besant's right sat Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949), one of the principal lieutenants of Besant, and on her <sup>left</sup> ~~right~~ sat Bi Amman, the mother of the famous Ali brothers. By holding such a coveted post, Besant had elevated the status of women in the Indian subcontinent. During the course of her presidential address Annie Besant rightly attributed, to a certain extent, the widespread political stir that had been aroused in the country, to the awakening of women.<sup>105</sup>

In the same session Sarojini Naidu too expressed the opinion that women could make immense contributions to the cause of the country's freedom. She stated :

I am only a woman and I should like to say that you all, when your hour strikes, when you need torch-bearers in the darkness to lead you, when you want standard-bearers to uphold your banner and when you die for want of faith, the womanhood of India will be with you as the holders of your banner, and the sustainers of your strength. And if you die, remember, the spirit of Padmini of Chittor is enshrined with the manhood of India.<sup>106</sup>

In 1925, Sarojini Naidu became the first Indian woman to <sup>be</sup> ~~to~~ elected as President of the Congress. In her presidential address, she said :

You have done something that may serve to redeem for one moment the shame and degradation of your fallen manhood. In giving to a mere woman, the woman who for years and years rocked the cradle and sang lullaby, that national standard which is the emblem of your own regeneration, you have gone back to the earliest inspiration that built your civilization and admitted the woman a co-sharer and a comrade in the secular and spiritual evolution of a people.<sup>107</sup>

Apart from her immense contribution in the area of politics, Annie Besant had played a big role for the emancipation of women and in arousing their consciousness. She had the distinction of being the first President of the Women's Indian Association, one of the main objectives of which was the spread of literacy among women. She

remained its President right till her death in 1933. The inspiration provided by her played a big part in mobilizing women in large numbers for the cause of the country's freedom. One feels inclined to agree with Reddi's view that "Dr Besant prepared the ground for the Gandhian Freedom Movement in which women have played a prominent part".<sup>108</sup>

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41. Swarnakumari Devi has given a vivid description of the day in Bharati, Vol. 32, No. 2, June 1908. Interestingly, on that day many Bengali Christian women

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  49. Bharati Ray, *op.cit.*, p. 187.
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  52. "Examples may be multiplied. Of the more well-known women, Labanyaprabha Dutta regularly used to hide revolvers and proscribed books to assist her biplabi

brother. Sarojini, the sister of Aurobindo Ghosh, stood solidly by him and collected funds for his defence when he was being tried for the Alipore Bomb conspiracy. Lilabati Mitra welcomed him to her home on his release from imprisonment despite warnings that it might impede the release of her own husband, Krishnakumar Mitra. Charushila Debi of Midnapur gave Khudiram Bose shelter for a few days after his attempted assassination of Kingsford at Muzaffarpur. She had to go underground during Khudiram's trial" (cited in Bharati Ray, *op.cit.*, p. 188, fn.32).

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99. Nehru's letter to The Leader, 21 June 1917.
100. S.R. Mehrotra, Towards India's Freedom and Partition (Vikas, Delhi, 1979), p. 133.

101. Annie Besant, *India : Bonded or Free* (London, 1926), pp. 205-06. Also cited in Aruna Asaf Ali, *op.cit.*, p. 76.
102. Padmini Sengupta, *Sarojini Naidu : A Biography* (Asia Publishing House, Mumbai, 1966), pp. 137, 148. Also cited in Rajan Mahan, *op.cit.*, p.66.
103. Presidential Address of Mrs. Annie Besant at the Thirty-Second Session of the Indian National Congress, Calcutta, 26 December 1917. Cited in Aruna Asaf Ali, *op.cit.*, p. 76 and S.R. Bakshi, *Documents of Home Rule Movement* (Delhi, 1989), pp. 46-47.
104. Padmini Sengupta, *op.cit.*, p. 137.
105. A.M. Zaidi, ed, *Congress Presidential Address* (S. Chand, Delhi, 1988), Vol. 3.
106. *Ibid.*, p. 140.
107. Aruna Asaf Ali, *op.cit.*, pp. 76-77.
108. C.M. Reddi, "The Religious and Social Reforms", in J.H. Cousins, ed, *The Annie Besant Centenary Book* (Madras, 1947), p. 265. Also cited in Rajan Mahan, *op.cit.*, p. 69.

## **PART II : THE GANDHIAN ERA**

## CHAPTER-IV

### GANDHI'S PERCEPTION OF WOMEN

It would not be incorrect to say that in the history of revolutions and national liberation struggles of the twentieth century, the Gandhi – led mass movement occupies a unique position. Thus far the revolutions of the twentieth century took place only in those countries which were non-bourgeois in character such as Tsarist Russia, Colonial China, Vietnam and Cuba. In such states, it was by virtue of armed revolts that the movements succeeded in overthrowing the oppressive rules and in bringing back the power. In contrast, the highly centralized, bureaucratic colonial state in India was somewhat akin to the bourgeois state of Western Europe in certain respects. The Britishers were able to curtail the civil liberties of the Indians by using repressive measures through the rule of law and the powerful military strength at its command which became evident only when it faced challenge from a formidable mass movement. Since Britishers were able to exercise considerable authority, influence and prestige over the minds of the Indians, it could be called a semi-hegemonic state.

Gandhi was the first to realize that it was virtually impossible to overthrow such a powerful state through armed / insurrectionary movement. He believed that the Indians should find ways and means to reduce the impact of the prestige and authority of the colonial state and to create the counter-hegemonic influence of nationalist ideology and leadership. He was of the firm conviction that only a powerful, mass movement based on the principle of non-violence on a big scale by mobilizing people throughout the length and breadth of the country could rattle the British authority. The uniqueness of the Gandhian mass movement is underlined by the fact that thousands of women were able to take part in it in myriad forms. It would be difficult to appreciate the significance of women's participation in this movement without properly emphasizing the unique nature of the Gandhi-led mass movement, particularly because the national movement of India



is the only movement in the world, which succeeded in overthrowing a semi-hegemonic state.

A major aspect of the national movement's strategy of building counter-hegemony was the constructive programme, which provided ample avenues for women's participation. And considering that the struggle for independence was a long-drawn battle in which open warfare had no role to play, the best way to establish close contacts with the masses was through constructive work on a large scale. The constructive programme as envisaged by Gandhi, had both inner and outer dimensions. At the inner level the workers were to be given moral and psychological training, while at the outer level the constructive programme meant the proper kind of economic and social activity. Mahatma Gandhi

...interpreted women's political participation as an extension of traditional roles as well. The Mahatma emphasized Sita as a norm for Indian women to follow. Hindu women were brought up hearing about Sita's self sacrifice and devotion to Rama, her god-husband, as model for their behaviour in their conjugal families. And even though Sita was not a mother goddess, she was nevertheless a symbol of strength, as the chaste one who resisted the blandishments of the demon Ravana. Gandhi frequently characterized the British raj as Ravanaraj; the Mahatma thought that the women had a greater capacity to resist the temptations of foreign rule, and to suffer non-violently for their beliefs. Through his Satyagraha movements, Gandhi sought to instill non-violent courage in all Indians. For the Mahatma, therefore, women's participation in the nationalist movement was necessary for ideological reasons as well as for the practical reason that with women involved the national movement would be linked to every home in India.1

The Britishers tried to create norms, values, body of beliefs and attitudes in regard to what was good and what was bad, legal-illegal, right-wrong, etc. and thus succeeded in framing political, social and moral culture within the framework of which they could

control, manipulate and establish their rule on a firm footing. It is in this context that Gandhi's role assumes great significance. He succeeded to a great extent in creating a counter-culture in the areas of politics, society, and morality.

The counter-culture of the Gandhi-led mass movement emphasized the feminine culture as opposed to the basic character of the British rule wherein the symbols of power, prestige, status and individual successes represented a masculine character. The feminine traits were simplicity, service, religion and dedication, which were not governed by the desire to secure benefits and favours from the colonial authority. The significant point is that the feminine traits represented passive resistance in which war or the use of brute force (which represented the masculine traits) had receded into the background. In this form of non-violent passive resistance, the masses firmly reject the oppressive, insensitive and immoral alien authority through withdrawal of support (without resorting to the use of force).

Gandhi has often been criticized because he had identified women with virtues of sacrifice, suffering and quiet non-violent struggle and thus relegated them in the process to a somewhat inferior position in the male-dominated patriarchal society. However, it would be fair to say that in extolling these feminine virtues Gandhi had not excluded men. In fact, he thought that the best way to counter 'male' symbolism (the British rule) was to project the alternative, feminine vision in opposition to individualism, competitive and aggressive self-development. Gandhi thought that the women were much better placed at the moral, cultural and ideological levels to attempt the method of non-violent passive resistance. *Stree Dharma*, a women-oriented journal reported in 1930: "Because the qualities which this new form of warfare is displaying are feminine rather than masculine, we may look on this life and death struggle to be free as the women's war."

Gandhi had perceived the concepts of feminine as the process of becoming more like women at the psychological and spiritual levels. The physical aspect epitomized in non-violence and moral non-cooperation. The spiritual aspects included:

- i. The feminine activity of spinning which demanded patience of a very high order, and Gandhi believed that the women had this quality in abundance.
- ii. Doing good even to those who do evil deeds and give pain and suffering. Gandhi related this aspect to the women's child bearing and child rearing functions, which highlighted the spirit of sacrifice and patience in suffering and selflessness.
- iii. Taking care of the helpless. This aspect was derived from the biological activity of nursing the child, which established a beautiful relationship between the mother and the child. Gandhi had sought to extend this relationship to the entire society.

## II

The upsurge in women's politicization – as in the politicization of the entire Indian society – is associated with the non-cooperation movement which saw the participation of women on a large scale in constructive programmes laid down by Gandhi like spinning and khadi work. According to Gail Pearson these were not mere extensions of “household activities”;<sup>2</sup> but were intrinsic to the type of movement Gandhi had envisaged in which such constructive work performed by both men and women had an extremely valuable role to play. By the late 1920s women had started participating in increasing numbers in public bonfires of foreign cloth even in the mill areas at night and by 1930 all-night dharnas consisting exclusively of women had begun to be organized. The myth of the drawing-room elite women fostered by the colonial bureaucracy had exploded by then. By the time the first phase of the civil disobedience movement ended in 1931-32, women were firmly entrenched in the mass movement and in mass politics, which encompassed diverse sections of women--from the urban rich to the rural poor. The main body of women participants were not from the intelligentsia or even the big urban centers. Thousands of rural women took recourse to defiance of the law in forests and villages, where they stood with their children around them. Almost every house had become a sanctuary for the lawbreakers. Women selling the “salt of freedom” at every corner in the course of the Salt Satyagraha campaign universalized the concept.<sup>3</sup>

Before the appearance of Gandhi on the political scene of India, the women from the elite classes had dominated the “women’s movement” in India. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay had characterized the Indian feminist women as inspired by Europe and within the bourgeois-capitalist framework.<sup>4</sup> While the Liberals and Radicals differed in their views in regard to the role of women in the freedom movement and the importance of tradition in their lives, they were unanimous in their opinion in so far as they viewed women within the familial context. They both felt that women’s main role lay at home and political participation by women was seen only as an extension of their familial roles. The idea of women’s active political participation was just unimaginable. Even in the social reform movement women had limited role to play because it regarded women as targets, and not instruments, of social reform. No serious effort had been made on a big scale to enlist the support of women.

With the formation of women’s organizations at the national level like AIWC and WIA, women began to assume responsibility for their own education and for social reform. They also began to associate themselves with political activity, though on a small scale.<sup>5</sup> Women leaders like Sarojini Naidu had already made their presence felt on the national scene. Some argue that it was the tide of nationalism, which pushed women towards the path of progress. “The great leap forward made by the Indian women is one of the significant milestones in our national progress. Cramped by age-old customs, bound by mouldy traditions, they had lain languishing behind the four walls of their little domestic yard, seemingly untouched by the passing juggernaut of swift changes, until one day almost like a tornado the great gale of nationalism swept the land crashing down the ancient boundaries and setting into motion new currents, weaving new patterns of thought and living breaking through and across the deepcuts of ancient usage.”<sup>6</sup> But “it was Gandhi who gave a new direction, strength and inspiration to the freedom movement and drew into it women in large numbers.”<sup>7</sup>

Though no one can deny the influence exercised by Gandhi on women, particularly in regard to their participation in the national movement,<sup>8</sup> but at the same time there has

been lots of criticism about the methods used by him to advance his movement.<sup>9</sup> The methods used by Gandhi generated a big controversy which led to the alienation of some leaders from ~~his~~<sup>him</sup> political, prominent examples being Tilak and Bose; Godse too justified Gandhi's assassination on these grounds. <sup>10</sup> Besides, there were women too who were not in agreement with Gandhi's modus operandi, and therefore thought it prudent not to associate themselves with the Gandhian movement.<sup>11</sup> But the number of men and women who disagreed with him was marginal. Gandhi had the support of majority. In fact, Gandhi was so deeply respected that even the guardians of women participants - fathers, husbands, and brothers - encouraged them to extend their whole -hearted cooperation to Gandhi in his mission. <sup>12</sup> "Women were drawn to Gandhi by his magnetic personality, his unique naturalness and transparent sincerity" <sup>13</sup> .

Apart from Gandhi's charismatic personality many other factors set him apart from other reformers and political leaders who had either preceded him or were his contemporaries.

"It would be difficult to name a single modern Indian leader who stands apart from his province, caste or creed. We cannot think of Lokamanya Tilak without the historical traditions of the great Maratha race; we cannot picture Lala Lajpat Rai without the setting of the virile Arya Samaj. But the same cannot be said of Mahatma Gandhi.... Excepting the language, he has as much in common with the Gujaratis as with the sons of Madras and Bengal. He combines in himself the keen analytical faculty of Madrassese, the emotion of the Bangalee, the intrepidity of the Maratha, the directness and candour of the skin and the precision and tactfulness of a son of Gujarat". <sup>14</sup> He laid stress on self-reliance and the idea of seeking support from the government never appealed to him. He was of the ~~from~~<sup>firm</sup> belief that personal reform was to be given more importance than social reform, and social reform was to precede the political independence. "To postpone social reform till after attainment of Swaraj is not to know the meaning of Swaraj." <sup>15</sup> Also, women became targets as well as instruments of social reform. "Their historic role, therefore, was to lead the forces of social revolutions against inequality, exploitation and social justice- not only for women, but for all oppressed groups in society."<sup>16</sup> He believed that the social transformation could take place only if efforts were made for the

uplift of all-particularly the Harijans and the women-which led to the regeneration of the Indian societies. Gandhi had "envisioned the Indian freedom struggle as not merely a political movement for deliverance from the Raj but as an active avenue for effecting meaningful social re-construction. One is inclined to submit that the Gandhian vision can be defined as a body of ethico-moral beliefs and social prescriptions urging Radical overhaul of the existing political structure for the ultimate creation of an "ideal Society".<sup>17</sup> According to Judith Brown, "He visualized a total renewal of society from its roots upwards so that it would grow into a true nation, characterized by harmony and sympathy instead of strife and suspicion, in which castes, communities and sexes would be equal, complementary and interdependent." 18 Gandhi thus encouraged women to take part in the freedom movement, apart from working for their emancipation at the social level.

Amrit Kaur, one of Gandhi's closest women associates, remarks: "When he (i.e.Gandhi) called on Indians to join his army for the freedom fight he stressed that women would be just as acceptable to him, if not more so than men, because he needed moral courage far more than physical prowess. This was I felt an irresistible call to my sex and something which threw a new light...on how whilst fighting for freedom women would also, under his leadership, be able to fight against many of the excrescences that had crept into our society, including the subjugation of women. Indeed, political freedom for him was only the first step towards the building up a new order of society." 19 Gandhi's methods were thus in sharp contrast to those of his predecessors. 20 At Gandhi's call, " they came out in larger numbers from the shelter of their homes to take part in the struggle for India's freedom. Once the old shackles were removed, it was no longer possible to replace them in the same way. Attempts were no doubt made to go back, but they were bound to fail."21

According to Gandhi, "... to call woman the weaker sex is a libel; it is man's injustice to woman. If by strength is meant brute strength, then indeed is a woman less brute than man. If by strength is meant moral power then woman is an immeasurably man's

superior. Has she not great intuition, is she not more self-sacrificing, has she not great powers of endurance, has she not great courage? Without her, man could not be. If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with woman."<sup>22</sup> There are various factors behind Gandhi's motivation to support the cause of women and to involve them in the cause of the country's freedom. Some scholars attribute this to his upbringing and cultural background, or the influence of his deeply religious mother,<sup>23</sup> and wife <sup>24</sup> or his effeminate character. <sup>25</sup> Perhaps "the most enduring influence which moulded Gandhi's thought and his attitude towards women, was the profound impact of his mother, Putlibai Gandhi".<sup>26</sup> To quote Gandhi, "If you notice any purity in me, I have inherited it from my mother, and not from my father.... The only impression she ever left on my mind is that of saintliness."<sup>27</sup>

Gandhi's vision of women was also greatly influenced by his wife, Kasturba. While referring to his carnal desires, Gandhi candidly admits that he had inflicted innumerable tortures upon his wife "who bore them with remarkable forbearance and fortitude".<sup>28</sup> Gandhi further remarks: "Perhaps only a Hindu wife would tolerate these hardships, and that is why I have regarded woman as an incarnation of tolerance."<sup>29</sup>

It may also be noted that during the course of his political career Gandhi had interacted with a large number of women who were his close associates, the notable examples being Annie Besant, Oliver Schriener, Millie Graham Pollock, Margaret Cousins, Madeline Slade (Mira Behn), Sarojini Naidu, Saraladevi Chaudhurani, Amrit Kaur, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Sushila Nayyar, and so on. In their own humble ways, the women mentioned above did contribute to a certain extent in the framing of Gandhi's perception of women.<sup>30</sup>

Religion too played an important role in shaping Gandhi's vision of women. According to Athalye, Gandhi was mainly influenced by Vaishnavism, liberal Jainism and his deep respect for Christ. <sup>31</sup> Ganguli believes that it was Buddhism and Islam that had influenced Gandhi. <sup>32</sup> Basham opines that in supporting the cause of women in society, Gandhi was influenced by Western feminism. <sup>33</sup> Erikson says that since Gandhi had psychological problems in accepting the natural superiority of women in possessing

such virtues as love, kindness, etc., he made efforts to become more maternal than the most motherly of mothers.<sup>34</sup> Even Gandhi's basic philosophy of Satyagraha is said to negate the aggressive, masculine stereotypes of human potential while incorporating the gentle, peaceful and communitarian aspects normally associated with women.

But among the various influences which shaped Gandhi's vision of women, it seems that religion was the major factor which became evident from the fact that the ideals of womanhood emphasized by him were chiefly Sita, Savitri, Damyanti and Draupadi.

### III

#### **Gandhi's Condemnation of Social Evils**

Gandhi had ruthlessly condemned the various social evils which made the condition of women even more pathetic. He was very severe in his criticism of the preference for sons among the Indian families. To quote him, "I make no distinction between son and daughter. Such distinction is in my opinion invidious and wrong. The birth of a son or a daughter should be welcome alike".<sup>35</sup> Birth of a female child was not welcome mainly because of the inevitable wedding expenses and the "hateful system of dowry". Gandhi sharply criticized these abhorrent practices saying that even though women are the ardhgini or the better half, yet they are "reduced to the position of a mere cattle to be bought and sold".<sup>36</sup> Gandhi implored upon the educated youth to shun the despicable system of dowry. He was surprised that the educated youth did not dare to offer resistance to this unhealthy custom. He said: "How is it that so many boys and girls who have even passed through colleges, are found unable or unwilling to resist this manifestly evil custom (compulsory marriage with dowry paid and received) which affects their future so intimately?"<sup>37</sup> He went to the extent of saying that those young men who demanded dowry should be ex-communicated.<sup>38</sup>

Another social evil which deeply pained Gandhi was child marriage, particularly ill-matched marriages in which young girls were married to men good enough to be their



grandfather. Gandhi was so vehement in his criticism of child marriage that he called it “an immoral and inhuman act”, and he considered it “a crime against god and man to call the union of the children a married state...”<sup>39</sup> Gandhi was of the opinion that such a widespread evil could not be cured through mere legislation. He felt that the enlightened public opinion would be more effective. “I am not opposed to legislation in such matters, but I do lay greater stress on cultivation of public opinion, the Madras case would have been impossible, if there had been a living public opinion against child marriages. The young man in question is not an illiterate labourer, but an intelligent, educated typist. It would have been impossible for him to marry or touch the girl, if public opinion had been against the marriage or the consummation of the marriage of girls of tender age. Ordinarily, a girl under 18 years should never be given in marriage. This custom of child marriage is both a moral as well as physical evil. For it undermines our morals and induces physical degeneration. By countenancing such customs we recede from God as well as swaraj. A man who has no thought of the tender age of a girl has none of God. And undergrown men have no capacity for fighting battles of freedom or having gained it.”<sup>40</sup>

Gandhi was also deeply moved by the pathetic conditions of child widows. He regarded prohibition of remarriage of child widows as senseless and cruel which ought to be abolished. He was extremely critical of the parents who committed the sin of marrying their infant daughters. He suggested that such parents should make amends by remarrying their daughters if they were widowed in their teens.<sup>41</sup> He also encouraged educated young men to marry girl widows.<sup>42</sup> However, in the case of older widows, Gandhi had a different point of view. He expressed the opinion that “voluntary enlightened widowhood is an invaluable social asset”. According to him “a real Hindu widow is a treasure. She is one of the gifts of Hinduism to femininity”. “Thus, a widow’s life marked by self-control, sacrifice and service was an ornament, and benefit to religion and society and hence deserved reverence and veneration from Hindu society.”<sup>43</sup>

In regard to the custom of purdah Gandhi opined that it was a big obstacle to the growth of Indian women. To quote him :

I thought of the wrong being done by men to the women of India by clinging to a barbarous custom which, whatever use it might have had when it was first introduced, had now become totally useless and doing incalculable harm to the country. All the education that we have been receiving for the past 100 years seems to have produced but little impression upon us, for I note that Purdah is being retained even in educated households, not because the educated men believe in it themselves, but because they will not manfully resist the brutal custom and sweep it away at a stroke. I have the privilege of addressing hundreds of meetings of women attended by thousands. The din and the noise created at these meetings make it impossible to speak with any effect to the women who attend them. Nothing better is to be expected so long as they are caged and confined in their houses and little courtyards.<sup>44</sup>

Gandhi believed that the barbarous custom of purdah was causing immense harm to the country. He stressed:

“ Let us not live with one limb completely or partially paralyzed... By seeking today to interfere with the free growth of the womanhood of India we are interfering with the growth of free and independent spirited men... It (i.e.,Purdah) accounts for our own weakness, indecision, narrowness and helplessness. Let us then tear down the purdah with one mighty effort.” <sup>45</sup>

In regard to the economic independence of women, a disciple of Gandhi had asked him about his attitude towards the modification of laws relating to the right of the women to own property. Gandhi replied:

I would answer the question by counter question: has not independence of man and his holding property led to the spread of immorality among men? If you answer 'yes' then let it be so also with women. And when women have rights of ownership and the rest like men, it would be found that the enjoyment of such rights is not responsible for their vices or their virtues. Morality, which depends upon the helpness of a man or woman, has not much to recommend it. Morality is rooted in the purity of our hearts.<sup>46</sup>

As far as roles of men and women in society are concerned, Gandhi believed that there was the basic difference in the social roles and functions of men and women. Though they were to play different roles, yet these were not contradictory. According to Gandhi a woman's place was in the home, while the man was responsible for providing woman with the necessary means to enable her to run her home efficiently. In fact man was the bread earner. The woman's first duty was towards her husband, then his family and finally the country. According to Gandhi, Sita personified the spirit of sacrifice, fidelity, suffering and moral strength, typical of Indian womanhood.

While emphasizing the complementary roles of men and women, Gandhi made it absolutely clear that women were in no way inferior to men. The very idea of calling woman the weaker sex was not acceptable to Gandhi. <sup>47</sup> He asserted that women were blessed with immense spiritual strength and they were not weak (*stree abala nahin hai*), though men were stronger at the physical level. <sup>48</sup> He went to the extent of arguing that those scriptures which look down upon women, should be condemned. "The ancient is, therefore, not sacrosanct to Gandhi ji, if it has turned to dross. His heart bleeds for those who suffer under the burden of traditions." <sup>49</sup> Arguing that those scriptural injunctions which were in conflict with true morality should not be followed, Gandhi said that "all that is published in the name of scriptures will not be taken as the word of God". Gandhi even suggested the removal of all those injunctions in the Smritis which did not appeal to the moral sense. <sup>50</sup> He was of the opinion that man's lust for power and prestige had led to the subjugation of women and also to the degeneration of the society. Thus, while giving

his consent to the traditional role differential between man and woman, he also wanted to break the traditional stereotypes. This he did by recommending equal rights for both, by emphasizing that women were in no way ~~to~~ inferior to men and by encouraging women to fight for their rightful place in society.

However, Gandhi had never thought of role modification or reversal of roles. His ideas on women's role were greatly influenced by his high-caste, middle-class Hindu upbringing within the patriarchal framework. The idea of transcending the constraints imposed by the patriarchal norms did not appeal to him. Even while women were expected to take an active part in social reforms, but this was merely considered as an extension of their familial roles. Perhaps this is the reason why the male guardians had no objections to the women taking part in Gandhi's constructive programmes. They felt secure that the women of their families would not try to transgress the boundaries of the male-dominated patriarchal framework. 51

Gandhi had expressed the opinion that the entry of women into <sup>politics</sup> ~~political~~ would purge the system of all corrupt practices and render the system clean. He thought that non-violence and passive resistance were basically feminine traits which women had imbibed as a result of long tradition of sacrifice and suffering within the home. It is for this reason he felt that women were ideally suited to participate in the national movement for India's independence-the basic ideals of which were *ahimsa* and *satyagraha*. According to Gandhi, "progress in civilization consisted in the introduction into human life and social institutions of a large measure of the law of love or self-suffering which woman represented best in her own person. This was a profoundly transformed projection on the broad canvas of social life of an attitude, which had come into being in the privacy of his personal life".52

As already mentioned, Gandhi felt that the first duty of a woman was towards her husband, the family and the country came later. Bringing up of children and taking care of the infirm and aged parents of the husband were the prime duties of women. To quote him: "It became my conviction that procreation and consequent care of children were

inconsistent with public service.... If I wanted to devote myself to the service of the community... I must relinquish the desire for children and wealth and live the life of a *vanaprastha*". 53

He was thus of the opinion that it was difficult for a woman to combine her duties at home with those outside the home. For those who were burdened with familial responsibilities, service to the country must come later. It is precisely for this reason that the wife of Manidas was asked not to join the Dandi March. 54 Thus in Gandhi's scheme of things there could be no political participation for women at the cost of their familial responsibilities. 55

Despite the views expressed above, Gandhi took up issues like Swadeshi<sup>56</sup> and prohibition and tried to motivate women to fight for them. He also expected women to play leadership roles. 57 He tried to capitalize on women's feminine traits and traditional qualities by extending their traditional roles into the political sphere.<sup>58</sup> As stated above, Gandhi gave priority to the familial responsibilities of women. They could take part in the freedom struggle only after fulfilling their responsibilities at home.

Another aspect of Gandhian ideology was that those men and women whose commitment towards the cause of the country's freedom was absolutely firm, should remain celibates (like Sushila Nayar); and if they married they should live like celibates. To quote Gandhi:

Without overcoming lust, man cannot hope to rule over self; without rule over self, there can be no Swaraj... No worker who has not overcome lust, can hope to render any genuine service... Great causes... cannot be served by intellectual equipment alone, they call for spiritual effort or soul force. Soul force comes only through God's grace and never descends upon a man who 'is a slave to lust'.<sup>59</sup>

He firmly believed that "Without *Brahmacharya*, the *Satyagrahi* will have no lustre, no inner strength to stand unarmed against the whole world... his strength will fail him at the right movement." 60

Gandhi is understood to have given advice to Vijaylakshmi Pandit and her husband to live like celibates at the time when he gave his blessings to <sup>the</sup> couple on the occasion of their wedding.<sup>61</sup> It is interesting to note that when the Kripalanis expressed their desire to marry, Gandhi discouraged Sucheta from <sup>y</sup>marrying J.B. Kripalani; he subsequently held the former responsible for J.B.'s straying away from the path. <sup>62</sup> It may thus be seen that though Gandhi did make efforts to demolish the traditional image of women, yet he never tried to change the patriarchal system of Indian society.

In cases where women wanted to participate in the national movement, but their husbands did not allow them to do so (despite their having fulfilled all their familial responsibilities), Gandhi advised such women to take the plunge and join the movement even if it meant defying their husbands. In such cases, Gandhi put the blame on the men for being selfish in not allowing their wives to fight for a noble cause. Gandhi even went to the extent of suggesting that, if necessary, women should not hesitate in using the civil disobedience based on ahimsa and truth against the unreasonable restrictions imposed upon them within the home.<sup>63</sup>

It would be appropriate to point out here that in cases where women were actively involved in the national movement, it did lead to a certain amount of tension within their homes. Vijaylakshmi Pandit has pointed out in her autobiography that her mother Swarup Rani found it difficult to adjust to the new life style which was brought about as a consequence of both her (Vijaylakshmi Pandit's) brother and father joining the Gandhian movement. Swarup Rani felt greatly disturbed at the constant encroachment on her privacy by the external world of politics.<sup>64</sup> She was just not prepared to sacrifice the interests of her

family for the sake of the nation. Vijaylakshmi too had experienced great tension when she was put behind the bars and there was nobody to take care of her young daughter. She even expressed regrets for having taken part in the national movement at that point of time.<sup>65</sup> Another glaring example in this respect is that of Rajkumari Amrit Kaur who had developed strained relations with her brother who had resented her active involvement with the national movement. In his letters to Amrit Kaur, Gandhi had expressed his deep concern over this development and advised her to take urgent steps to sort out her differences with her brother. This advice of Gandhi was, however, inconsistent with his advice to women to actively involve themselves in the national movements even if it meant defying authority of their husbands and other family members.<sup>66</sup>

In regard to his relationship with his wife Kasturba, Gandhi says:

Kasturba herself does not perhaps know whether she has any ideals independently of me. It is likely that many of my doings have not her approval even today. We never discuss them. I see no good in discussing them. For she was educated neither by her parents nor by me at the time when I ought to have done it. But she is blessed with one great quality... a quality which most Hindu wives possess in some measure. And it is this: willingly or unwillingly, consciously or unconsciously, she has considered herself blessed in following in my footsteps, and has never stood in the way of my endeavor to lead a life of restraint. Though, therefore, there is a wide difference between us intellectually, I have always had the feeling that ours is a life contentment, happiness and progress.<sup>67</sup>

From the above quotation it becomes evident that Gandhi had attributed the intellectual difference between Kasturba and himself to her lack of education. Besides, Gandhi's perception of an ideal wife was governed by his own experience of a high-caste Hindu from Gujarat. Above all, he took it for granted

that Kasturba had willingly agreed to play the traditional role and to stay in the background. 68 And whenever she assumed the mantle of leadership it was mostly when Gandhi was in jail. Even in such times she appealed on behalf of Gandhi. 69

How far did Gandhi succeed in the political mobilization of women on a mass scale? Did he succeed in raising the consciousness of women to a level where they could start seeing the world from an altogether different perspective? There can be no denying that Gandhi had met with stupendous success in mobilizing women on a mass scale who came out of their homes and contributed their humble mite to the cause of the country's freedom. Gandhi was so overwhelmingly moved by this response that he made the following comment: "The part that women played in this struggle should be written in letters of gold". However, as far as changing the women's level of consciousness is concerned it would be fair to comment that Gandhi did not succeed. In fact, he did not make efforts in the direction of bringing about a change in women's level of consciousness. As already stated, in Gandhi's scheme of things radical change in the traditional framework based on the male-dominated patriarchal norms was never envisaged.

It would be interesting to note that the women political leaders who had worked in close association with Gandhi had tended to agree with Gandhi's framework of ideas and values. Even those women who were trying to better the lot of their fellow sisters did not question the system. 70 To quote Gail Minault:

Sarojini Naidu, one of the best-known Congress women activists during the non-cooperation movement of 1920-22 and again during the Salt Satyagraha of 1930, emphasized traditional feminine models in a speech championing swadeshi before a gathering of women in 1921. They were the custodians of Indian culture, 'supreme in everyday affairs of life; only



they could bring about a renewed pride in India. Swaraj had to begin in their homes, not by politics alone. She recalled the sacrifices of Sita, of Savitri, and the strength of Draupadi, and asked the women to give up all foreign clothing, to take up spinning, to wear only homespun saris, and in this way to resist foreign rule. Naidu thus emphasized the dual nature of women's roles, the self-sacrificing wife, the strong, self-sufficient mother.<sup>71</sup>

#### IV

#### **Gandhi's Perception of Women compared to that of Nehru's**

Just as Sita was Gandhi's cherished ideal of womanhood to be emulated, Jawaharlal Nehru's ideal woman was Chitrangada – the Manipuri princess portrayed in Rabindranath Tagore's celebrated lyrical drama. The image of Sita as depicted in the Ramayana served as the pivot around which gender constructions revolved through the century in the Indian civilization. Gandhi tried to capitalize on this powerful symbol in his efforts to mobilize the Indian women on a mass scale to participate in the national movement for India's independence. However, this construction of gender relations (in which Sita has been identified with virtues like self-sacrifice, chastity, infinite capacity for suffering, power of endurance, etc.) has been criticized in the growing body of gender structures which have appeared in the last few years. The reason being that it did not cater to the basic needs of women, particularly in regard to their sexual needs and material requirements.<sup>72</sup>

But Rabindranath Tagore, by recasting the mythical image of Chitrangada, paved the way for a new gender construction that was more reasonable to women because it accommodated their needs within the family and in the area of work. The new image as portrayed by Tagore integrated woman's sexuality and her identity as man's equal partners in the sphere outside home.

Nehru often saw the personality of Chitrangada – who believed in equality – reflecting through his wife Kamla, an ardent votary of gender equality. Kamla seemed to come to Nehru as Chitrangada herself, saying:

I am chitra. No Goddess to be worshipped, nor yet the object of common pity, to be brushed aside like a moth with indifference. If you deign to keep me by your side in the path of danger and daring; if you allow me to share the great duties of your life, then you will know my true self.<sup>73</sup>

Nehru and Kamla used to share in equal measure the common responsibility arising from a total participation in the national movement for India's independence. This created a deep emotional bond between Kamla and Jawaharlal, which long spells of the latter's incarceration or phases of Kamla's illness could not shatter.

Nehru was greatly impressed by the enthusiasm shown by women while participating in the civil disobedience movement. This movement bound women from different backgrounds to a common cause and they took pride in their being co-sharers with their male counterparts to the cause of the country's liberation. Jawaharlal, who was greatly inspired by the Russian model at the ideological level, said that the dynamism shown by women in taking part in the civil disobedience alongside men was much more appealing than the silent suffering of the women in the Sita tradition. To quote him:

Women had always been there of course, but now there was an avalanche of them, which took not only the British Government but their own men-folk by surprise. Here were these women, women of the upper or middle-classes, leading sheltered lives in their homes, peasant women, working-class women, rich women, poor women pouring out in their tens of thousands in defiance of government order and police *lathi*. It was not only that display of courage and daring, but what was even more surprising was the organizational power they showed.<sup>74</sup>

Gandhi did succeed in mobilizing women on a mass scale and in motivating them to fight for the country's liberation, but his perception and logic was different. He was quick to realize that by constantly holding out the example of Sita's power of endurance and silent suffering, he would be able to motivate the women to join his movement which was based on the principles of non-violence and passive resistance. This type of movement was very much in keeping with the feminine traits of women. Gandhi was very clear about the role the women were supposed to play in the non-violent movement. He approved picketing, but did not like the idea of women joining the civil protestors. He did not want women to take part in any such protest, which was marked with violence. Gandhi's thinking on women and their sexuality was governed by his typical middle-class background. He thus restricted women's participation in the national movement within certain fixed social parameters. He was of the firm belief that women's primary responsibility was taking care of her home and husband, and that there was a clear demarcating line between the roles of men and women. He declared: "In trying to ride the horse that man rides she brings herself and him down."<sup>75</sup> He thus discouraged those women from taking part in the national movement who were burdened with familial responsibilities. The idea of becoming economically independent also did not appeal to Gandhi. He said, "I do not believe in women working for living or undertaking commercial enterprises".

Most men of those times agreed with Gandhian ideology about women because this did not challenge their dominant role within the patriarchal society. Some women, however, did not agree with Gandhi. Margaret Cousins wrote to Gandhi: "Division of sexes in a non-violent campaign seems unnatural and against all the awakened consciousness of the women of today... there can be no watertight compartments of service. Women ask that no marches, imprisonments, demonstrations organized for the benefit of India should prohibit women from a share in them".<sup>76</sup>

Nehru, on the other hand, viewed women's roles from a different perspective. Addressing the students of Mahila Vidyapeeth at Allahabad in 1928, Nehru said:

The future of India cannot consist of dolls and playthings and if you made half the population of a country a mere plaything of the other half, an encumbrance on others, how will you ever make progress. 77

Speaking at the same institution in 1934, Nehru said:

The habit of looking upon marriage as a profession almost and as the sole economic refuge for woman will have to go before woman can have any freedom. Freedom depends on economic conditions even more than political and if woman is not economically free and self-earning she will have to depend on her husband or someone else, and dependents are never free. 78

Thus Nehru's approach was more realistic and practical as compared to that of Gandhi's. "This thinking was a part of his socialist philosophy, which through study and observation, and as a response of a sensitive and analytical mind, had fermented and crystallized in him over the years." 79 When Kamla got arrested on 1-1-1931, Nehru felt proud of his wife's sacrifice for the sake of her country. He thus wrote to his daughter Indira: "... Mummie is thoroughly happy and contented.... It was pleasant new year gift to me". 80 He further said: "She wanted to play her own part in the national struggle and not be merely a hanger-on and a shadow of her husband. She wanted to justify to her own Self as well as to the world". 81

Present studies on the Gender issues have shown that there was an attempt to recast women – both in the social reform movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the national movement – within the constraints of the patriarchal norms. 82 Some scholars argue that the soft programmes like spinning which Gandhi had specially conceived for women had actually stereotyped women as domesticated subjects in a patriarchal society

where the man were supposed to play the role of bread earners. Gandhi had also never spelt out women's role once the freedom struggle was over. To Nehru, however, the natural corollary to women's participation in the national movement was just the beginning of a greater struggle – a struggle which would give women an independent identity and she would enjoy equal rights with men. He was one of the few leaders who wanted the women's movement to prosper. To quote him:

I have the greatest admiration... for the women of today. I have faith in them. I am not afraid to allow them freedom to grow because I am convinced that no amount of legal constraint can prevent society from going in a certain direction. And if you put too much legal constraint the structure breaks. 82

At the time when the Karachi Congress passed a resolution on the fundamental rights in March 1931, Nehru made sure that due emphasis was given to women's rights. To quote Bimla Luthra: "One of the main points of the resolution was that in a planned society, women's place 'shall be equal' to that of man; she was to have equal status, equal opportunities and equal respect. Women were not to be barred from any sphere of activity merely on grounds of their sex. Third, marriage was not to be a pre-condition to the enjoyment of full and equal civic status, of social and economic rights by women. Fourth, the state was to consider the individual as the basic social unit and plan accordingly." 83

Nehru was an ardent votary in respect of the identical standards of morality for men and women. In 1925 when Nehru was the president of the municipal committee of Allahabad, some members proposed that all prostitutes should operate in a certain area on the outskirts of the city. In this connection Nehru made the following observation:

The segregation of prostitutes, even if possible, would be objectionable precisely as the segregation of criminals would be objectionable. I do not believe in issuing a fiat that prostitutes must not live in any part of the city

of Allahabad except a remote corner. If this is done I would think it equally reasonable to reserve another part of Allahabad for men who exploited women and because of whom prostitution flourishes. 85

By highlighting the images of Sita- Savitri- Damyanti which provided the focal points of reference for virtues like self-sacrifice, chastity and moral power, the national leaders, including Gandhi, attempted to project spiritual superiority of India over the Western scientific ideas in the material sphere. In the process they had created a “new patriarchy” for women. 86 Nehru, however, was opposed to the above ideas. He did accept that these “estimable ladies” had played an important role in the context of the times in which they lived, but at the same time he said that they had lived in a particular age and served certain social compulsions which were not applicable to the present –day modern world of science and technology. The silent suffering of Sita was certainly not the trait which Nehru wanted to see in women. He was of the firm conviction that a nation could not progress unless women were given their rightful place in society. While speaking at the centenary celebrations of Prof. Karve on 18<sup>th</sup> April 1958, Nehru made the following observation:

It is more important, if there can be any comparison, for the women of a nation to be educated – than its men. I say it by way of emphasizing the importance of the mothers and daughters and sisters of a nation. One of the truest measures of a nation’s advancement is the state of its women. For out of the women comes the new generation. and it is from their lips and from their laps that it begins to learn. Political revolution is important and economic revolution is still more important. but the most important of all is the social revolution in the people. It is in the measure that the social revolution succeeds that it provides the basis of the economic stability and progress. Women play the most important part in the social revolution. 87

the national movement who were burdened with familial responsibilities. The idea of becoming economically independent also did not appeal to Gandhi. He said, "I do not believe in women working for living or undertaking commercial enterprises"

Most men of those times agreed with Gandhian ideology vis-a – vis women because this did not challenge their dominant role within the patriarchal society. Some women, however, did not agree with Gandhi. Margaret Cousins wrote to Gandhi:

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## **CHAPTER – V**

### **NON-COOPERATION AND KHILAFAT CAMPAIGNS (1920-22) AND WOMEN'S MOBILIZATION**

Gandhi's return to India around 1915 after his long-drawn struggle for the cause of the Indians settled in South Africa, received a warm and big welcome from the Indian masses. His arrival in India was a turning point in the India's struggle for freedom. He was venerated as a messiah, a harbinger of peace, and huge masses were drawn towards his charismatic personality from various sections of society irrespective of caste, creed and social status. The achievements registered by him in South Africa were well known to the Indian people. His simplicity, humility, simple dialect and down to earth style made his identification easier and spontaneous. Little wonder that when Gandhi made his Non-cooperation programme known to the masses, the response was overwhelming, with men and women from different sections of society extending their whole-hearted support.

Though Gandhi had arrived in India from South Africa in 1915, the first political struggle was launched by him in 1919. After the end of World War I, when there were renewed demands for self-rule, the Government passed the repressive Rowlatt Bills "at the beginning of 1919 prohibiting public protest and suspending civil liberties. This was when Gandhi began to develop a programme for women".<sup>1</sup> Gandhi formed a Satyagraha Sabha and announced that a hartal (closure of shops, offices and all public activity) would take place on 6<sup>th</sup> April. On this day, he addressed a gathering of women (representing different classes and communities) and impressed upon them the need to take part in the Satyagraha (peaceful resistance) movement.

On 13<sup>th</sup> April 1919, at the orders of General Dyer hundreds of peaceful protestors were massacred at Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar. "Men, women, and children were



killed in this brutal massacre, unmasking forever Britain's civilizing mission". 2 The Hunter Enquiry Committee Report informed that as many as four hundred people were shot dead and twelve hundred people were injured. This was not the end of it. There were various incidents where sufferings were inflicted upon women and their modesty was outraged. According to a statement made by twenty-three women:

We were called from our houses wherever we were and collected near the School. We were asked to remove our veils. We were abused and harassed to give out the name of Bhai Mool Singh as having lectured against the Government. This incident occurred at the end of Baisakhi last in the morning in Mr. Besworth Smith's presence. He spat at us and spoke many bad things. He beat some of us with sticks. We were made to stand in rows and to hold our ears. He abused us also saying: 'Flies what can you do, if I shoot you?' 3

In retaliation, there was an outbreak of violence in different parts of the country in the form of arson, looting and even assaults on Englishmen at the physical level. Gandhi felt greatly pained at these incidents, and on 18 April, 1919 he called off his Satyagraha campaign. He candidly admitted that his decision to launch the Satyagraha campaign was a "Himalayan miscalculation" because the masses were not prepared for this. 4 Though the campaign was called off, but it was very much clear that women had begun to actively associate themselves in the ongoing struggle for India's independence.

## II

Another important incident to have taken place around that time was the Khilafat question which had enormously agitated the Muslims of India. This issue was related to the Turkish Empire and the treatment meted out to the Khalifa who is held in high esteem by the Muslims by virtue of his being the temporal head of the Muslims all over the world. "The Khalifa, 'successor to the Prophet Muhammad, commander of the faithful, the shadow of God on earth' –these exalted titles convey the symbolic importance of the Khalif to the community of Islam."5

During the period of war, the Prime Minister of England had given an assurance to the Muslims that no harm would be caused to the Turkish Empire. A deputation of the Muslim Khilafat Conference also paid a visit to England with the purpose of putting forward their point of view in regard to Turkey and the Khilafat. The British government, however, turned down the requests of the Muslims. On 14 May 1920, a draft treaty called the Treaty of Sevres was published, setting aside all the assurances given to the Muslims by the British during the war period. This greatly annoyed the Muslims, and the Khilafat movement started assuming serious proportions during the 1919-20 winter. Gandhi saw this as a good opportunity for uniting the Hindus and the Muslims and for bringing the masses into the national mainstream. To quote Gandhi:

I discovered the weapon of non-cooperation in the form we know while thinking about the Khilafat. I feel very much about this issue because I am a staunch Hindu. If I wish to see my religion protected against seven crores of Muslims, I must be ready even to die for the protection of their religion. Similarly, for the Hindus as well remain a meaningless ideal until Hindus and Muslims develop unity of heart; till such time, cow-protection will remain an impossibility. I do not believe that the Muslims will betray us once their end has been achieved. Those who believe in religion do not betray anyone. I do not know of a single instance in history of a great sacrifice by the Hindus having gone unrewarded. What was done before now was a kind of bargaining. There is no place whatever for bargaining in our dealings today. The Hindus should help the Muslims as a matter of duty and look to God for reward. They must not ask anything of the Muslims. I seldom mention the subject of cow-protection to the Ali Brothers. I have already published the conversation with Maulana Abdul Bari. He knows, all the same, that I have not concealed any hope of being able to melt the hearts of Muslims, by dying for them, if need be. It is my conviction that God always regards a good. My prayer is to God. I have sold myself to the Muslims without demanding a price and I ask each and every Hindu to do the same. This is no policy, but plain dealing. I would not have been ready to die for Muslims if their case had been weak. If knowing their case to be obviously just. I

remained aloof through doubt or fear, my Hinduism would be disgraced and I would have failed in my duty as a neighbour.

I know that the Khilafat agitation is not a political weapon. It is the duty of all Muslims to defend the Khilafat. It is a different matter that Hindus may not regard it as their duty as well. The Muslims will not accept cow-protection as a religious duty. But all Muslims know that for the Hindus it is so. In the same way, all Hindus must know that to defend the Khilafat is a religious duty for the Muslims. I have great respect for the devotion of the Ali Brothers to their religion. They would not have become fakirs just for the sake of political benefits. Of course, fighting for the Khilafat will increase the power of Islam. It is no crime to rejoice at this. The Muslims cannot but be glad; and, if we wish that people of other faiths should be happy at the awakening of a new spirit in Hinduism and its regeneration, we Hindus should also be glad at the regeneration at Islam. 6

He sternly warned the government that if justice was denied to the Muslims, he would be left with no other option but to resume Satyagraha. 7

Thus in September 1920, the Non-cooperation resolution was put forward before the Congress session at Calcutta. It was ratified at Nagpur in December 1920. In the first Non-cooperation agitation itself the participation of women became very much evident. In different parts of the country, women joined the processions, propagated the use khadi and charkha and some of them even took the extreme step of leaving government schools and colleges. Urging the Hindu and Muslim women to adopt Swadeshi goods and to start using the spinning-wheel, Gandhi wrote:

It is plain that the Khilafat agitation will benefit the cause of swadeshi. But the resolve not to use articles made in Europe only so long as the Khilafat issue remained unsolved does not seem to me proper. Muslims ought not to use European goods even if they get full justice on the Khilafat question. It is, moreover, not enough to boycott European goods alone. No foreign goods, including Japanese goods, should

be used. The swadeshi movement is intended as a permanent change. No matter how justly Europe deals with us, it is our duty to use only swadeshi goods so that India may ever get perfect justice. The country, thus can prosper only through the spinning-wheel and the handloom. Lakhs of Muslims have given up spinning and lakhs of Muslim weavers have given up weaving. If Hindu and Muslim women again take to spinning and Hindu and Muslim weavers to weaving, within a short time the country will be able to produce all the cloth it needs. I wish, therefore, to draw the attention of all. 8

Women constituted a powerful group within the Khilafat movement. They extended their support to the movement both morally and financially by giving their ornaments in charity. A letter by Sir Harcourt Butler to Lord Hardinge aptly highlights the important role played by women in the movement. He writes: "The priests and women are the most important influences in India... and I am not very much afraid of the politicians until they play on these two".<sup>9</sup>

A woman who played an active role during the Non-cooperation movement was the indefatigable Ali matriarch Bi Amman. She was the mother of the respected Ali Brothers and commanded great respect in political circles. She was vehemently against the idea of women remaining confined to their homes and not associating themselves with the political activities. She had earlier been associated with women through meetings to support the work of the Anjuman-e-Khuddem-e-Ka'aba, the purpose of which was "to collect funds to maintain the house of the Ka'aba and other Muslim holy places, and to defend them against non-Muslim aggression, purposes which they emphasized were "strictly religious, having nothing to do with politics".<sup>10</sup>

She then appeared on the national scene in 1917, at the age of sixty-seven. during the agitation to secure the release of Annie Besant and her own sons from their wartime internment. Annie Besant was released and elected President of the National Congress that year. Muhammad Ali was chosen to preside over the Muslim League in anticipation of his release which, however, did not occur. At the annual meeting,

of the League, Muhammed Ali's photograph occupied the presidential chair and Bi Amman spoke briefly on his behalf from behind the veil of her white burqua.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps, for the first time a Muslim woman addressed a political gathering in which both Hindus and Muslims were present. At the Congress session also she occupied a seat next to Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu. This incident was extremely significant because it symbolized the growing participation of Indian women in the political field.

The Central Khilafat Committee started a women's branch in 1921 which organized women's meetings throughout the country during the Khilafat and Tilak Swaraj Fund raising campaigns. These meetings were addressed by Bi Amman, Begum Muhammad Ali and Begum Hazrat Mohani among others. They often joined forces with the Hindu women, the prominent among them being Sarojini Naidu, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and Basanti Devi, wife of C.R. Das of Calcutta. They addressed the meetings held exclusively for women during the course of which

... they exhorted women to do their duty to God and their country by urging their men to support non-cooperation and by imbuing their children with religious faith and patriotism. They also called for contributions to the cause. Women responded with small gifts of cash and larger gifts of gold, bangles, anklets, and ear rings for the Khilafat and Tilak Swaraj Funds.<sup>12</sup>

At a meeting held in Delhi in May 1920, Aktar Begum, an eminent local Shia woman, made a fervent appeal to the Muslim women to defend their religion by extending support to the Non-cooperation campaign. To quote her :

Are we not masters (Sir) in our homes? If we are, we can compel the men to observe the non-cooperation resolutions religiously. We should remain firm in our faith, ostracize all defaulters, and keep our men strictly in line. Our religion and resolve are on trial. If you wish to stand well in the eyes of God and the

Prophet, and enter paradise in the retinue of Fatima, daughter of the Prophet, do not neglect your religious views.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, support of the Khilafat cause and Non-cooperation were looked upon as religious duties.

Bi Amman continued to tour different parts of the country in support of the Khilafat cause even after the imprisonment of her sons again in late 1921. At a ladies' conference in Bombay which was attended by six thousand people, a resolution was passed urging women to excel as numbers. As President of the All India Ladies' Conference at the Ahmedabad Congress in December 1921, she appealed to the people to unite, for, "without cooperation among the different communities we can't liberate our country or live peaceful and honourable lives".<sup>14</sup> She also spoke about the way the British "had chained India in the twin fetters of slavery and eternal domination. The people had to choose whether to wear their chains or to work for their national and religious freedom".<sup>15</sup>

At a mass meeting in Punjab, she lifted the veil of her burqa while addressing a huge gathering and sought to justify this action of hers by saying that all the people present there were just like her sons and daughters. There was therefore no reason to follow the purdah custom in their presence. She further said that Swaraj was sure to come if women had "a heart to make sacrifices for the cause".<sup>16</sup>

In February 1922, she visited Patna and Bhagalpur. At Bhagalpur, she was not given permission to see the political prisoners and as a mark of protest the prisoners and their relatives refused to see each other.<sup>17</sup> She managed to raise funds to the tune of Rs.60,000/- from Darbhanga (Bihar) for the Khilafat Committee ; and at Mongyr she was presented with a purse of Rs.20,000/-.<sup>18</sup> The Delhi branch of women's Khilafat Committee headed by Begum Ajmal Khan and Begum Ansari collected a sum of over Rs.20,000/-<sup>19</sup> during Bi Amman's visit to Delhi. It may thus be seen that these women leaders played a big role in raising funds and in aiding the Swadeshi effort. They

recognized the strength that women's traditional role in the family gave them and built upon that foundation. According to Gail Minault :

Indian woman for all her subordination to the male in society is queer in her own reality. She is the arbiter of words and instructor in basic religious observances and cultural attitudes. She is also viewed as vulnerable, needing to be protected and this too gives her a way of calling her men to duty to defend her honour and their own.<sup>20</sup>

The Government did consider the idea of prosecuting Bi Amman for making objectionable speeches, but thought it prudent not to arrest her.<sup>21</sup> Mahatma Gandhi also had high regards for Bi Amman which is evident from the special message he sent to her at the time of his arrest in March 1922. He said : "Tell Bai Amman to pray for me and for all of us and to carry on the work which we have left behind. Her prayers and work will be quite sufficient to ensure our quick release and success".<sup>22</sup>

Thus from a stage when Bi Amman addressed basically religious meetings which were exclusively for women, she graduated to become a highly respected and popular mother figure of great eminence who had become confident enough to address gatherings unveiled before huge masses. A popular poem of the time which reminds us of the achievements of Ali Brothers and their mother is quoted below:

Thus spoke the mother of Muhammad Ali, Son, give sons life for the Khilafat.  
And when with son, too, Shaukat Ali, son give your life for the Khilafat. Don't  
give your old mother cause for grief, but confessing your faith, give up your life.  
Give your all in this home of trial, son, give your life for the Khilafat. Even had I  
had seven sons, God sacrifice them all for the Khilafat. This is the way of the  
faith of the Prophet, Son, give your life for the Khilafat.<sup>23</sup>

Bi Amman continued to play an active role in the political field right till her demise in 1924. Gandhi paid a glowing tribute to her in the following words : "She

realised that the freedom of India was impossible without Hindu-Muslim unity and Khaddar. She, therefore, ardently preached unity which had become an article of faith with her. She had discarded all her foreign or mill made clothing and taken to Khaddar ....<sup>24</sup>

### III

Gandhi had always believed in following a policy of moderation and restraint<sup>25</sup> which became glaringly evident from his advice to the agitated delegates who had assembled in Amritsar : “I say, do not return madness with madness, but return madness with sanity and the whole situation will be yours”.<sup>26</sup> However, two incidents which took place in May 1920 convinced Gandhi about the nefarious designs of the British. The first one was the publication of the text of the Treaty of Sevres on 15 May by the British Government “which verily signalled the complete dismemberment of the Turkish Empire”.<sup>27</sup> The second one was the release of the findings of the Hunter Committee on 28 May which was appointed to examine the tragic incident connected with the Rowlatt Satyagraha. From the Report it became clear that the British had no intention of making amends for the violence unleashed by them in Amritsar. On the contrary, the British had every intention of ignoring the criminal acts of its officials.<sup>28</sup> Realization then dawned upon Gandhi that every Indian was bound to participate in the Non-cooperation movement.

Gandhi felt justified in making a fervent plea to the Indian masses to adopt the path of Satyagraha with the ultimate purpose of removing a regime that showed scant regard to the basic principle of civilized governance. Writing in *Young India*, he made his views about the Non-cooperation movement very clear :

... We must voluntarily put up with the losses and inconveniences that arise from having to withdraw our support from a Government that is ruling against our will. Possession of power and riches is a crime under an unjust Government, poverty in



that case is a virtue, says Thoreau. It may be that in the transition stage we may make mistakes, there may be avoidable suffering. These things are preferable to national emasculation.

We must refuse to wait for the wrong to be righted till the wrong-doer has been roused to a sense of inequality. We must not, for fear of ourselves or others having to suffer, remain participators in it. But we must combat the wrong by ceasing to assist the wrong-doer directly or indirectly.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, on 23 July 1920 Gandhi made an announcement that the Non-cooperation movement would be inaugurated on 1 August 1920 which would be a day of fasting and prayer and the suspension of any kind of business. Tilak was firmly committed into extending his whole-hearted support to the movement. But, unfortunately, he left for his heavenly abode before the dawn of 1 August. Gandhi, who was one of the pall bearers along with the Ali Brothers, Dr Saifuddin Kitchlew and many others, expressed his grief in the obituary note in the following words:

My strongest bulwark is gone.... A giant among men has fallen. The roar of the lion is hushed... For us he will go down to the generations yet unborn as a maker of modern India. They will revere his memory as a man who lived for them and died for them ... Let us erect for the only Lokamanya of India an imperishable movement by weaving into our own lives his bravery, his simplicity, wonderful industry and his love of his country.<sup>30</sup>

At the special session of the Indian National Congress held on 4 September in Calcutta, the Congress decided to extend its full support to Gandhi's Non-cooperation campaign – a decision that was ratified at the annual session of the Congress held in December in Nagpur.<sup>31</sup> The stage was thus set for the first great struggle to be carried out in a purely non-violent manner against one of the mightiest imperial powers known to the history of mankind.

Barely a month and a half after the special session of Congress which was held on 4 September 1920, Gandhi, while addressing a women's meeting at Dakor, made the following observation :

This Government has taught us false ways. We have come to believe that foreign cloth adds to one's beauty. Even the clothes worn by you, in this gathering, have the odour of foreign cloth. Even mill cloth is not swadeshi. The cloth produced by the mills is not sufficient to meet the needs of the country. You are not quite so poor. I have seen people who are poorer than you. I have seen men who have only a loin-cloth with which to clothe themselves and women who have not more than a torn skirt. We can set ourselves free this very day if India adopts swadeshi, if all women take to the good old spinning-wheel and if they put on clothes made only with yarn spun by themselves. To the women of the past, virtue was beauty. Wearing of foreign cloth makes a woman ugly. There is a touch of the harlot in a woman seeking loveliness by fine dressing. What is our image of Sita and Damayanti, whom we adore? Is it that of women clad in finery? We revere Damayanti who wandered in the forest, half-clad, and Sita who suffered vanavasa for fourteen years. Was those days, people covered themselves with nothing more than leaves. To seek beauty by adorning oneself is to imitate the harlot. If you want to follow your dharma, you must first understand the swadeshi dharma. It consists in using cloth made with yarn spun by yourselves and woven by your menfolk, singing as they work. I am truly handsome, since the clothes I am wearing are made with yarn spun by women and lovingly woven by men. If you wish to deliver yourselves from Ravanarajya and establish Ramarajya, you must adopt swadeshi and introduce the spinning-wheel in your homes. There are many women now who will be able to teach you how to work it. Each one of you should spin for at least an hour daily, singing devotional songs all the while. Get the yarn, afterwards, woven into cloth.

You will no doubt find it difficult at first to use hand-spun cloth in place of foreign muslin. Some women in Bombay complained to me that their saris,

which previously weighed less than forty tolas now exceeded seventy tolas in weight. I replied to them in figurative language, saying that, they had till now lowered their own weight by reducing the weight of their clothes. During pregnancy, women cheerfully carry their load for nine months and suffer the severe pains of child-birth with joy. This is the time for the birth of new India. Will you not be ready at least to carry the weight of heavy clothes at this hour? You can make India free only if you bear this burden. If you wish to give birth to a new India, every woman must bear this burden not merely for nine months but for nine years.

If you wish to be pure like Sita, if you would give up the many forms of subtle mental degradation of the kind I have described and make others give them up, if you wish to understand your true dharma rather than wickedness, then you must whole-heartedly join in the movement for swaraj. Each one of us must be able to distinguish between true dharma and wickedness. Many fraudulent men will also come to you for contributions. I would ask you not to contribute to any of them. I hold out my hand to you only because I feel certain that you have trust in me. I shudder to introduce the corrupting influence of money in my work. Had I the strength and the tapascharya to be able to carry on my work without money, I would most certainly not ask for it. But I do not have such tapascharya and such strength. I also am a man of Kaliyuga and am full of failings, but I know that I am constantly striving to overcome these failings. So, if you trust me, contribute anything you wish to, from a pice onwards. The funds will be handled by the Swarajya Sabha.

Finally, I request you to see that these few things I have placed before you do not go in at one ear and come out at the other. By adopting swadeshi, you will be able to save some money on clothes. You will be able to give your children milk and ghee out of this. At present, you spend on your children. I, too, want a small share from the amount you will save. But contribute only if you wish to. Even if you do not give money, you should at any rate follow the dharma of spinning which I have explained to you. We have today to wash off the pollution

caused by the eclipse. The right way of doing so is to purify our hearts. If all of you take the name of Rama in good faith and pray for Ramarajya in place of Ravanarajya, I can assure you that you will find that Ram is the strength of the weak. May your hearts be ruled by God and may He set you free from all other forms of enslavement.<sup>32</sup>

Gandhi felt greatly satisfied that he had begun his Non-cooperation movement with women. The response which he got was indeed overwhelming. To quote him:

I started begging for money at Dakor and, fortunately, I made a beginning with women. Among them, the sister who first gave me a piece of jewellery made a living by grinding flour for others. When she took off her ear-ring and handed it over to me, that same moment I was convinced that India's women had understood the holy nature of peaceful non-co-operation. The experiences which followed were marvellous indeed. Girls in Ahmedabad parted with their bangles, rings and chains. In Poona, they literally showered jewellery on me. There were similar scenes in Belgaum, Dharwar and Hubli. Muslim women in Delhi, from behind their purdah, gave jewellery, currency notes and cash.

When the women in the country have woken up, who can hinder swaraj? Dharma has always been preserved through women. Nations have won their independence because women had brave men for sons. By preserving purity of character, they have kept dharma alive. There have been women who sacrificed their all and saved the people. When women, who have done all this, have become alive to the suffering of the country, how long can that suffering last?

The women among whom I see this awakening cannot be described as educated, but they have understanding. They fully understand the obligations of dharma. What the educated classes take a long time to see, the women, with their

gift of intuition, have understood at a mere hint. They have not taken long to realize that swaraj means Ramarajya.

Everything has been put clearly before them. The nature of the [country's] suffering has been explained. They have also been told that the remedy for this suffering is non-co-operation, and also what non-co-operation means. They have realized their duty in helping to preserve Hindu-Muslim unity, while everyone understands and remains faithful to her own religion.

If women keep up what they have so wisely begun, I am sure we can provide education for the whole country with the help of the jewellery which they can spare. The women who have offered their ornaments have done so on the understanding that they will not ask them to be replaced before we have got swaraj, but will do without them. Thus, with a little sacrifice of jewellery on women's part, we can arrange for the country's education and promote swadeshi. I hope, therefore, that they will continue the great yajna which commenced at Dakor and that the husbands or other relatives will not restrain any of them in this sacred effort.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, Gandhi was of the firm conviction that women had an important role to play in the national movement for the country's independence, and that they should consider it a religious duty to wear only khadi clothes. To quote him :

Mahatmaji appealed to the ladies not to neglect to do their part in the country's struggle for freedom. He urged them to exhort and encourage their husbands and sons to pursue the path of duty, and urged them to help vigorously and effectively in the building up of a free India by taking up swadeshi. In the days of Ravana's government even Sita Devi had to wear for fourteen years the rough garment made from the bark of the tree. Even so, today, when the adoption of swadeshi meant a long step in the path of freedom for India, the Indian ladies should make it a matter of religious duty with them not only to wear only khaddar clothes both

hand-spun and hand-woven, they must also devote one hour at least daily to hand-spinning and help in the hand-weaving of cloths. The women of India owed it as a duty of their country to discard fineries in clothes and to be simple in their dress.

In swadeshi there is an effective way to swaraj and redress of the Punjab and the Khilafat wrongs and vindication of the national honour. The main burden of the task of propagating swadeshi lay on the women of India and they must rise to the occasion.<sup>34</sup>

The women who had heard Gandhi's speech were so moved by his passionate pleas and the faith he reposed in India's women power that they felt the least hesitant in giving their jewellery for the noble cause, and were greatly motivated to take the swadeshi vow.

The first Non-cooperation movement was a big success with women in different parts of the country joining the processions and propagating the use of khadi and charkha. Renuka Ray informs that she was so deeply inspired by the speeches made by Gandhi in Calcutta in 1920 that she, along with her other fellow students of the Diocesan College, offered their jewellery to Gandhi. "Many of these girls, including herself gave up their studies and joined the non-cooperation movement".<sup>35</sup>

Vijaylakshmi Pandit too came under the spell of Gandhi when he visited Allahabad and stayed at the historic Anand Bhawan.

I sat on the ground with my cousin and the little figure began to speak. He was quite incongruous.... He spoke very bad Hindi and yet the interesting thing was that none of these things seemed to matter after the first few minutes. He was saying something which was gripping everybody. He was compelling people to look at him, to listen to him .... And he ended by appealing to women to give him something".<sup>36</sup>

In response to Gandhi's appeal, Mrs. Pandit donated her gold bangles, though she regretted that she did not give away more.<sup>37</sup>

In view of the consideration that the Amritsar tragedy was one of the main reasons behind the launching of the Non-cooperation campaign by Gandhi, it would be appropriate to consider the role played by women in this movement in the land of five rivers --Panjab. Though the women's participation was rather restricted, yet they had started taking part in the nationalist processions and in public meetings. Manmohini Sehgal has fond memories of a public meeting in Lahore during the period under reference. She says :

While the meeting was in progress, the police came and requested the women to leave the place so that they could lathi-charge the men. But the women refused to leave and later on the meeting dispersed, and men and women took out a procession.... It was the first time when women in Lahore participated in a political procession, raised slogans and walked in the streets together with men.<sup>38</sup>

Sarala Devi Chaudhurani had played a significant role in making the charkha and khadi popular among the women of Punjab. During 1919-22, Sarala Devi was so strongly influenced by the Gandhian ideology of Non-cooperation that she donated most of her jewellery for the nationalist cause. She even went to the extent of returning the prestigious Padmavati Gold Medal which had been awarded to her by the Calcutta University. She was first woman to have been awarded with the Medal.<sup>39</sup> By learning to spin the charkha and by wearing a purely khadi dress, she became a Gandhian to the core. In a letter addressed to Gandhi she wrote that the khadi sarees worn by her greatly impressed her audiences, so much so that her songs and speeches did not draw much attention.<sup>40</sup> To make the Non-cooperation movement more popular, she organized and addressed several meetings in the Punjab region during the course of which she tried to inculcate among the Punjabi women the Swadeshi fervour and nationalist feelings. Though she was based in Lahore, Sarala Devi travelled extensively in various parts of northern India in order to popularize the concepts of charkha and khadi. She was the

spokeswoman of Gandhi in the true sense who felt that India's poverty could be countered only through Swadeshi :

The hand that spun in India supplied the nation with food and comfort... The revival and protection of a dead art, the remodelling of Indian homes, the reclothing of India by India's own hands-this is the Alpha and Omega of Swaraj.<sup>41</sup>

Apart from Sarala Devi, other women who made significant contributions in mobilizing women in the Punjab region were Radha Devi, Parvati Devi and Lado Rani Zutshi.<sup>42</sup>

Thus in most of the women's meetings in Punjab the emphasis was on the propagation of Gandhi's view that poverty in India was due to the abandonment of Swadeshi by the people. Gandhi had repeatedly asserted that :

We should use only such cloth as is produced here ... Our mothers should take the spinning-wheel into their homes. We should get cloth woven by our weavers and wear only that. I tell all my brothers and sisters of India: Swadeshi is your duty. Wear khaddar: Non-cooperation consists in doing all this. Do not draw the sword. Sheathe it. The sword will only cut our own throats.<sup>43</sup>

In Lahore the concept of Swadeshi was sought to be made popular through the motto "shama se shama jalti hai" which meant that those who had already accepted and imbibed the concepts of charkha and khadi, should try to convince at least ten other people into accepting the Gandhian ideology of Swadeshi and wearing khadi clothes.<sup>44</sup> Thus the efforts made by Sarala Devi and other women of eminence in Punjab went a long way in binding the Punjabi women together at the emotional level. This can be gauged from the fact that "when Gandhi visited Jullundur in early 1921, the welcome address presented to him was printed on a piece of khadi supplied by the aged mother of a prominent lawyer of the city, Nazimuddin Shah".<sup>45</sup>



It is significant to note that the popularizing of the Swadeshi concepts did not remain confined to big cities only. In fact, its influence was felt in the smaller towns also. For example, in Karnal an exhibition to popularize khadi was organized and prizes were awarded to those khadi manufacturers who had done something substantial to make khadi popular. Also, as many as 3,000 women wearing khadi dresses “walked through the streets of Multan alongwith a cart full of khadi which they sold during the course of their unique march”.<sup>46</sup> Above all, in auspicious occasions like marriages, people could be seen attending the functions attired in khadi. Expressing great satisfaction at the success of the Non-cooperation campaign among the women in Punjab, Gandhi made the following observation :

It is my deep conviction that the women of the Punjab have understood my message. They have felt that Swadeshi is not merely a means of protecting India's wealth but... that in it lies the country's best freedom... I beg to state, deliberately and knowingly, that I do not believe the profound feelings of the Punjabi women to be directed towards me personally. They are taken up with admiration for me because of the truth that they see in me and the simplicity of Swadeshi which they have come to realize through me.<sup>47</sup>

Women began to participate in the Congress sessions in increasing numbers. At the annual session of the Congress held in Ahmedabad in December 1921, as many as seventeen women delegates represented Punjab, “which was the highest number for any province in the subcontinent”.<sup>48</sup>

Gujarat was another region where the Non-cooperation campaign of Gandhi became immensely popular among women. Perhaps one important reason for this was that Gandhi himself hailed from Gujarat. Besides, many of his close women associates who were affiliated to his Ashram contributed a great deal in making the Non-cooperation movement popular in several towns, cities and villages of Gujarat.<sup>49</sup> Among the women of Gujarat who came into close contact with Gandhi during the early phases of the movement, the name of Anasuya Sarabhai stands out prominently.<sup>50</sup> She was the

sister of Ambalal Sarabhai, a leading mill-owner of Ahmedabad. She had been rendering social service since 1914 through providing education both to the children of the workers and to the workers themselves.

It was only natural that gradually a close association developed between Anasuya and Gandhi and it was mainly through their combined efforts that the Ahmedabad textile workers strike in February-March 1918 (involving 16,000 weavers) was a big success. Later, Anasuya participated energetically during the Kheda Satyagraha and was also one of the first signatories of the 'Satyagraha pledge' evolved by Gandhi to oppose the Rowlatt Bills.<sup>51</sup>

During the course of the Non-cooperation movement, Gandhi toured many villages of Gujarat along with Kasturba, Anasuyabhen and some other "Ashramite sisters", and impressed upon women the need to spin the charkha, wear khadi, boycott government educational institutions, remove untouchability and promote Hindu-Muslim unity. This motivated women to take part in the constructive programmes. Under Gandhi's inspiration several girl students left Government schools and colleges. prominent among them were Manibhen Patel and Miss Desai whose efforts were hailed by Gandhi in public.<sup>52</sup> In many of the women's meetings in Gujarat, women showed their generosity by donating jewellery and cash for the noble cause. Gandhi was so moved by such generous acts that after a meeting in Ahmedabad, he made the following statement :

This amount is more sacred than donations worth lakhs of rupees from millionaires. There is an aroma of the very soul of the women of Ahmedabad in every brass piece given here. Every coin is steeped with their devotion for the country... It is on the basis of such sacred small coins that I will erect the edifice of Swaraj.<sup>53</sup>

Gandhi was ultimately convinced that in the programme of work for swaraj, the contributions made by women were no less than those of men. He said, "I have

marvelled at the awakening among the women of Gujarat. They have great power in their hands. In the programme of work for swaraj, the women's share is as great as, in fact greater than, the men's. I pray to God that the women of Gujarat may play their part to the full and win glory for themselves and for the name of Gujarat and of India".<sup>54</sup> It is important to note that the Congress session which was held in Ahmedabad in December 1921 was marked by a big historical event. For the first time in the history of the Congress, women performed their roles as volunteers. Under the leadership of Nandubehn Kanuga,<sup>55</sup> a total of 131 women volunteers were present on the occasion.

In the metropolitan city of Bombay also, women extended their whole-hearted support to the Non-cooperation campaign. They imparted strength to the movement through a large number of meetings, emphasis on the importance of spinning, organization of khadi melas and, above all, through taking part in public programmes and demonstrations. Among the various women who played a key role in Bombay, the name of Avantikabai Gokhale deserves a special mention.<sup>56</sup> She played a leading part in the Chaparan Satyagraha in 1917. Credit goes to her for writing the first biography of Mahatma Gandhi in 1918. She remained an active political worker during the period 1920-1946 and was imprisoned many times. She also worked for the uplift of Harijans and welfare of women, and started the Hind Mahila Sangh with the purpose of bringing about nationalist awareness among women.<sup>57</sup>

Other eminent women who made efforts to popularize the constructive programme of Swadeshi in Bombay were Perin and Goshibehn Captain,<sup>58</sup> the Petit women Jaiji Jehangir and Mithubehn,<sup>59</sup> the Faizi sisters,<sup>60</sup> women from the Tyabji family, Manekabai Bahadurji<sup>61</sup> and, above all, Sarojini Naidu.<sup>62</sup> These eminent women were closely associated with some of the established women's organizations of Bombay of those times like Bhagini Samaj, the Gujarati Hindu Stree Mandal and Hind Mahila Samaj. And by virtue of their close association with these organizations, these women were greatly facilitated in spreading Gandhi's Non-cooperation campaign. Some other women's organizations which came into being in 1921 in Bombay are : Shri Sarada Samaj of Dadar, Ladies Khilafat, Committee, and Rashtriya Stree Sabha <sup>63</sup> which

played the most prominent role because of its close association with the Congress. Also, a National Girls' school was established in 1921.<sup>64</sup> During the Satyagraha Week which was organized by the Congress during 6-13 April 1921 in Bombay, Sarojini Naidu played a big role by addressing a number of meetings with the object of associating women in large numbers with the constructive programme of Swadeshi. Significantly, on the last day of the Week – 13 April – which happened to be the Jallianwala Bagh day, as many as 500 women were present to hear the speech of Sarojini Naidu.

There is no denying that the support extended by women in large numbers to the constructive programmes did make the Gandhian movement popular, but it would be fair to say that the household activities (like spinning, wearing khadi, etc.) “were not the only means of popularizing the nationalist movement”. Two public events in which women of the extended female space participated had a great impact on public consciousness : A procession to oppose the visit of Prince of Wales to Bombay in November 1921 featured the participation of up to one thousand women. The procession received extensive publicity and was described as ‘unique’.

The press also gave wide coverage to the participation of women in the public burning of foreign cloth in the mill areas at night. These events helped further to underwrite the legitimacy of the nationalist struggle. While the men of various factions argued among themselves, the women remained aloof from such politicking and worked for an idealized notion of swaraj and national unity.<sup>65</sup>

In the southern part of India, the East Godavari region of Andhra Pradesh deserves a special mention. Gandhi's visit to this region in connection with the All India Congress meeting at Vijayawada in 1921 was an important occasion in the political history of the district. His speeches in Andhra proved to be a big source of inspiration for women to participate in the struggle for freedom. In a speech delivered to women at Rajahmundry on 3 April 1921, Gandhi said :

You, my dear sisters, I want to warn you and to bring you to a sense of duty and religion. If there is a dancing girl amidst you, I ask you to make her life not one of shame. Take up the spinning-wheel and take the few pies that the work brings you, and it will bring pies and God into your house. Do you suppose that Rama and Sita would rest for a single moment if they knew a single woman might have to sell her honour for lust of men and for a mess of pottage? I ask you to discard all your fine garments and ornaments, if only for the protection of these dancing girls. Take up the spinning-wheel for their sake, if not for the sake of India. Take up the spinning-wheel for the sake of the purity of India. Take up the sari that the charkha can give you. Let the spotless sari of India be the protection of the virtue of man and woman in India. I ask you to consider that to wear fine foreign saris is a sin.<sup>66</sup>

A prominent example is that of Subbamma who paid a visit to Vijayawada with a group of women to seek the blessings of Gandhi. Under the magnetic influence of Gandhi, she took the plunge notwithstanding the various social constraints prevalent in those times. She happened to be the first woman of the region to participate in the national movement, and to be sent behind the bars for the noble cause. She also succeeded in motivating other women of the region to participate in the freedom struggle. Her efforts were hailed by the local newspapers. Sudarsini, a local newspaper, gave the following report : "We congratulate Smt. Subbamma for her patriotism and courage to go to Jail. We (the women) have greater tenacity of purpose than men. We hope that Andhra women will adopt Swadeshi at least now that they have heard of the heroism and conviction of Subbamma".<sup>67</sup> Another local publication made the following observation:

The District Collector of Godavari has acquired distinction in the policy of repression... But what could the poor officers do? They have arrested the men, yet the movement did not stop. For women have taken the place of men and hoisted the banner of Swaraj...<sup>68</sup>

However, in 1922, Gandhi called off the Non-cooperation campaign all of a sudden taking all concerned by surprise. But despite the suspension of the movement, “the atmosphere in the Godavari area remained charged, and women like subbamma continued to conduct meetings to popularise khadi and the concept of the abolition of untouchability, the two most important items of Gandhi’s constructive programme”.<sup>69</sup>

Another woman of the Godavari district who was deeply influenced by Gandhi was Durgabai, who started her political career at the tender age of eleven. Gandhi’s visit to the Godavari district brought a radical change in her thinking. Gandhi held a meeting at Rajahmundry on 6 April 1921. As a matter of chance Durgabai happened to be present in that city at that time in connection with the wedding of one of her close relatives. She made the best of her stay in Rajahmundry by attending Gandhi’s meeting. Seeing the volunteers collecting money and other valuables for the Tilak Swaraj Fund, Durgabai too climbed the dias to offer her collection to Gandhi. Holding the little girl’s arms Gandhi asked, “Why don’t you contribute your golden bracelets too”? Durgabai readily parted with her bracelets for such a noble cause.<sup>70</sup>

The patriotic fervour shown by the women of Andhra did not go unnoticed in the fortnightly government reports, as is evident from the following observation:

One feature which was specially noticed in these reports was the active part played by women... in carrying on an active political agitation. Some of them like Duvvuru Subbamma, Ponakka Kanakamma and Unnava Lakshmi Bayamma excelled the men propagandists in their ability to sway large masses of people.<sup>71</sup>

Thus, to a certain extent, credit for the success of the Non-cooperation movement in Andhra goes to women also. A recent study says that “if the Non-Cooperation Movement made relatively more progress in Andhra than in Madras Presidency, the credit goes partly to women”.<sup>72</sup>

In regard to the women's participation in Bengal in the Non-cooperation movement of Gandhi, Bharati Ray refers to three distinct features which are as follows:

First, the identification of the freedom struggle with *deshpuja* and the invocation of *shakti* continued, making women's entry into politics smooth.... Second, while Gandhi's views were not informed by a feminist perspective, they infused self-confidence into women. His assertion that women were morally better suited than men for the non-violent struggle removed the stigma of their inferiority vis-à-vis men.... Third, during the period under survey, Bengal produced political captains of national stature like C.R. Das and Bipin Chandra Pal, and politicized women with leadership abilities, such as Basanti Debi (b. 1880) and Hemaprabha Majumdar (b. 1884). These women leaders had access to the general body of women and helped to promote women's political and social awareness.<sup>73</sup>

In Bengal, C.R. Das' wife Basanti Devi played a key role by giving the lead to women's demonstrations and picketing shops which sold foreign goods. On 7 December 1921 the police took her into custody for selling *khadi* in a public street in Calcutta. Urmila Devi and Suniti Devi, her close associates, were also taken into custody. Though the police released them within a few hours, yet this incident greatly agitated the public. To quote Urmila Devi : "We also had set an example to the rest of the women; our arrest had produced the desired effect".<sup>74</sup>

Basanti Devi became the President of the Bengal Provincial Congress during 1921-22 and presided over its session in Chittagong in 1922. Thus a Bengali woman, perhaps for the first time, came to occupy a prominent position in the political leadership of the country. She was very much conscious of the fact that unless the women at the grassroot level were involved the national movement would not succeed. Her concern for the grassroot level involvement becomes evident from the presidential speech of hers: "If we have to get back to the simple and best life of India of old days, we have also to revive the dormant villages .... We have to reconstruct our villages, to build up our

village institutions under the conditions of modern life, but according to the genius of our national life".<sup>75</sup>

Bihar too did not remain alienated from the Non-cooperation campaign of Gandhi. In 1921, Sarala Devi of Hazaribagh launched the movement. During her Presidential address at the 16<sup>th</sup> Conference of Students of Hazaribagh in October 1921, she made a fervent appeal to them to boycott government schools and colleges and motivated them to register their strong protest against the Prince of Wales' visit to India.<sup>76</sup>

In Patna, it was Savitri Devi who played a significant role in making Gandhi's movement popular. In the latter part of 1921, she presided over many meetings where she ruthlessly condemned the imperialist designs of the British. "At these meetings participants reiterated their resolve to continue their fight against the British. Women carried the message of non-violence from door to door. They appealed for the boycott of foreign goods, picketed liquor shops and popularized the spinning of khadi in rural and urban areas".<sup>77</sup>

At the request of the Oriyan leaders like Gopabandhu Das, Gandhi visited Orissa for the first time on 23 March 1921. To introduce Gandhi to the people of Orissa, a big public meeting was held on the Kathjuri river bed at Cuttack.<sup>78</sup> Gopabandhu Das, the father of the Orissa's freedom movement, introduced Gandhi to the people in the following words :

Commrades! The Mahatma to whom you were all anxious to see is now present before you. He is known to every household and every individual in the country and it is superfluous for me to introduce him to you. Everyone in Orissa knows this great man. Orissa has not made sufficient advance in the political field but she is ahead of every other part of the country in all ages in the field of religion. All the great religious preachers of India have set their foot on the sacred soil of Orissa. Today another great man is here to preach the doctrine of political love.



Orissa has attained glory through ayes for religion. The Mahatma's politics is based on the very same foundation. I know that you are all anxious to follow the footsteps of the Mahatma. Orissa is famous for her catholicity. On the auspicious occasion of Mahatmaji's visit Orissa. I appeal to you all to imbibe the message of Gandhiji in full recollection of the ancient glories and catholicity of the Oriya people.<sup>79</sup>

In order to involve women in his programmes, Gandhi thought it better to address women in separate meetings. Thus on the very first day of his visit to Orissa, Gandhi addressed a small gathering of women in the Binod Bihari building premises at Cuttack.<sup>79</sup> Haimavati Devi made all arrangement for the meeting. Professor Mohini Mohan Senapati's wife sang a patriotic song on this great occasion.<sup>80</sup> About 40 women were present in the first meeting, which goes to show that Gandhi had already started making inroads into the psyche of the Oriyan women.<sup>81</sup> Significantly, this was for the first time in the history of Orissa that the Oriyan women attended a public meeting. Even more significant was the fact that for the first time a leader of Gandhi's stature and eminence addressed women in Orissa in a separate meeting.

A small group of Oriya women who addressed that meeting in Purdah went on to become active political leaders of Orissa in the next ten years, being tremendously inspired by the charisma and oratory of Mahatma Gandhi.<sup>82</sup>

In a speech addressed to a meeting of Utkal Samillani, Madhusudan Das, an eminent freedom fighter of Orissa, said : "We are the foreigners. It must be in our hand. We should use Charkha and we should wear khadi".<sup>83</sup> Madhusudan Das' speech influenced his niece, Rama Devi, to such an extent that from that day onwards she started spinning the charkha. Gopabandhu Das also made fervent appeals to all sections of Orissa, particularly housewives,<sup>84</sup> to devote their leisure hours to spinning.

When the Government of Bihar and Orissa ordered that anybody found guilty of forcing people to boycott foreign clothes would be tried on the charge of criminal

offences,<sup>85</sup> Kuntala Kumari Sabat retaliated by saying that : “Nation is our religion, Charkha is our life. We will hold Charkha in our hand and we will destroy all the conspiracy of the enemy”.<sup>86</sup> Under the inspiration of Gandhi, she started creating a new awareness among women through her sapient pen. She appealed to the Oriya women to boycott the use of “foreign goods and to destroy the administrative machinery of the British authority”.<sup>87</sup>

In 1922, Rama Devi, along with Padmavati Devi and Hiramani Devi, attended the annual session of the Indian National Congress held at Gaya.<sup>88</sup>

This marked a significant breakthrough as they regularly attended the subsequent sessions of the Indian National Congress. Arousal of this political awareness among women during the Non-Cooperation Movement continued and became more manifest during the course of the freedom movement. Though initially the number of women who joined the movement was very small, yet a beginning was made and gradually it swelled. This small band of women leaders had great influence over the general body of women and this went a long way in rousing their political as well as social consciousness since 1922 onwards.<sup>89</sup>

#### IV

Gandhi also made special efforts to secure the Muslim women’s participation in the Non-cooperation movement. To ensure this, he deftly avoided making references to Hindu mythology and scriptures which he generally employed to draw the Hindu women. When he appeared with Maulana Shaukat Ali to address a Muslim women’s meeting at Patna, he deliberately avoided mentioning Rama, Sita, Ravana, Draupadi, and so on. He urged the Hindu and Muslim women to unite together in a spirit of harmony and to strengthen the movement by taking to charkha and spinning. In order to garner their whole-hearted support, he told the Muslim women that “whatever was written in the holy Koran was all good and there was truth in all religions”. The full text of the speech

delivered by him at a meeting of Muslim women in Bombay on 19 July 1921 is quoted below:

Mahatma Gandhi rose to address the meeting .... He said that he had long connections with Mussulmans and that the gentleman who took him to Africa for the first time was a Muslim friend. He regarded all those present to be his sisters. All their efforts for the attainment of swaraj were meant for safeguarding their religion and there was no distinction whatsoever in his mind between the Hindus and the Muslims.

The Mahatma said that, in his opinion, all religions were good. Sometimes mistakes crept into religion at the instance of some misguided followers. Whatever was written in the holy Koran was all good, and there was truth in all religions. They all stood up for the cause of Islam and they did not want at all a Satanic raj in the world.

In the Satanic raj he could not do any good. He had received a telegram from Aligarh that afternoon intimating him that Mr. Sherwani had been sent to jail notwithstanding the fact that he was working for peace. There might arise an occasion when all good men might be sent to jail, and everybody should be ready for that occasion. In Africa, Hindus and Muslims, regardless of sex, went to jail and preserved the honour of their country. Those who were steeped in luxury would be unable to bear jail life where they would not get tea ten times a day and would not get fine clothes.

For the sake of your religion you should give up all luxury and begin to wear khadi. Until India gets swaraj and the Khilafat and the Punjab wrongs are righted, everybody should regard foreign cloth as not permissible. When we get swaraj, we would be able to prepare all kinds of swadeshi cloth and so you shall have to give up all luxury for six months.

He was very happy to hear of the spinning of Mrs. Haji Yousuf Sobhani. They should all keep the charkha near them as they kept their sons in their laps. Remembering God in their heart, they should spin on the charkha for the sake of swaraj and Khilafat at least for some hours every day. By the charkha not only the honour of Indian womanhood would be preserved, but they would be in a position to earn an independent living within doors. They could do more for the cause of their country by the charkha than by the sword. Many Indians got about Rs.8 to Rs.15 a month which was not quite sufficient for the maintenance of their families. In Bijapur, Bahen Ganga introduced two thousand charkhas into the homes of poor Indians, and as a result of this they were getting good and commendable hand-spun yarn from that place and they (the poor Indians) were earning thereby an independent living.

Continuing, the Mahatma said that they could manufacture the best Dacca muslin formerly, but owing to the present Government, their weavers were in a sorry plight and were quite unable to do their professional work. They should not go to Manchester for fine cloth. One Indian woman had given him an embroidered sari weighing about twelve seers and if they could wear saris of such weight, why could they not wear saris made of khaddar? Women could undergo greater pains and trouble than men and therefore nothing prevented them from the free use of the khadi. Mrs. Mazhar-ul-Huq gave him four bangles of diamond. Such a sacrifice showed that the swaraj was coming nearer for women loved their ornaments very much. That woman was beautiful who had got in her heart the idea of God. They should give up all outward signs of beauty. They should not go to Japan, France and China for fine cloth. They should all pray for the success of Hindus and Muslims, but their prayers would be effective when they had pure hearts and bodies covered with swadeshi cloth. That was a difficult resolution. But if they once determined to resort to it, it would be very easy indeed.

Concluding, the Mahatma exhorted those present by saying that they either should burn foreign cloth or send it to Smyrna. He thanked them for inviting him and giving him a patient hearing.<sup>90</sup>

Gail Minault points out that in order to make the Khilafat and Non-cooperation movements popular among the Muslim women, religious items and anti-British sentiments were skilfully used. Indeed, Muslim women became “a powerful opinion group within the Khilafat movement, supporting it morally with their firm religious faith and financially with their ornaments”.<sup>91</sup>

Apart from Gandhi, Bi Amman also made efforts to bring the Muslim women into the national mainstream. During the period 1920-22, as has already been pointed out, she toured different parts of the subcontinent to popularize the Khilafat issue. In an open letter written by her in 1920, Bi Amman made the following remarks : “We had been sacrificing ourselves for our fathers, husbands and sons, but so long as this spirit of Indian womanhood is not lost, I, for one, feel that nothing which really matters is lost”.<sup>92</sup> She was an ardent votary of Hindu-Muslim unity and was persevering in her efforts of propagating the Swadeshi cause. Under the influence of Gandhi, she had herself started wearing khadi clothes. In her various speeches addressed to women, she exhorted women to take to spinning of the charkha.

In conclusion we may say that although “women’s participation in the first non-cooperation movement was not on a mass scale and was mainly confined to those, whose husbands, fathers, brothers or sons had already joined the struggle and were in jail”, <sup>93</sup> there can be no denying that Indian women had made significant contributions both to the Khilafat cause and to the Non-cooperation campaign initiated by Gandhi. A Government of India publication observed that “the growing interest displayed by upper and middle class women in political and social questions, their increasing prominence on the platform and in the press ... must be taken as the dawn of a new era; and the fact that the number of women who take part in public life is still very small affords no reason for questioning its significance.”<sup>94</sup> Margaret Cousins also pointed out that the Non-

cooperation movement gave a big boost to the awakening of Indian women, and that “women’s ardent desire for the freedom of their country has given them such personal freedom that they are now welcomed into the open street as volunteers, as pickets, as politicians... They (i.e., women) do not naturally move towards fighting for their own freedom, but through throwing themselves into a ‘cause’ they achieve their own liberation... The Indian national movement cannot progress without the aid of women; the liberation of women will be aided by their devotion to the national movement”.<sup>95</sup>

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Geraldine Forbes, *The New Cambridge History of India*, IV.2: *Women in Modern India* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.124.
2. *Ibid.*, pp.124-25
3. Report on the Hunter Enquiry Committee, Indian National Congress, Statement 581, p.868. See Manmohan Kaur, *Women in India's Freedom Struggle* (Sterling, Delhi, 1985), p.248.
4. See "A Himalayan Miscalculation", in Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Navjivan, Ahmedabad, 1927), pp.356-58, for a detailed account of the reasons for the withdrawal of Rowlatt Satyagraha.
5. Gail Minault, *The Khilafat Movement: A Religious and Political Mobilization in India* (OUP, Delhi, 1982), p.1.
6. Gandhi's views on Khilafat were published in *Navjivan*, 30 January, 1921. Also see *Young India*, 25 August, 1920.
7. See Manmohan Kaur, *op.cit.*, p.140.
8. *Navjivan*, 4-7-1920. Also see *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (hereinafter CWMG), Vol.XVIII, p.8.
9. Gail Minault, *op. cit.*, 1982, p.149.
10. Maitrayee Chaudhuri, *Indian Women's Movement: Reform and Revival* (Radiant Publishers, Delhi, 1993), p.129.
11. *Ibid.*, p.30. Also see Gail Minault, ed, *The Extended Family: Women and Political Participation in India and Pakistan* (Chanakya Publishers, Delhi, reprint, 1989), p.13.
12. Maitrayee Chaudhuri, *op. cit.*, p.131. Also see Gail Pearson, "Nationalism, Universalization, and the Extended Female Space in Bombay", in Gail Minault, *op. cit.*, p.180.
13. Jana Everett, *Women and Social Change in India* (Heritage, Delhi, 1979), pp.66-67.
14. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 5 January, 1922.

15. Maitrayee Chaudhuri, *op. cit.*, p.131.
16. Amrita Bazar Patrika, 12 December 1922.
17. Ibid., 5 February, 1922.
18. Ibid.
19. Gail Minault, *op. cit.*, 1982, p.149.
20. Ibid., p.151.
21. Home Political Proceeding, 1922, File No.933, p.1.
22. Amrita Bazar Patrika, 21 March, 1922.
23. Gail Minault, *op. cit.*, 1982, p.13.
24. Amrita Bazar Patrika, 23 May, 1922.
25. M. R. Jayakar, *The Story of My Life* (Bombay. 1958), Vol.I, p.321.
26. The Amritsar session was very significant for Gandhi's political career because Gandhi's close association with the Congress started with this. To quote him "I must regard my participation in Congress proceedings at Amritsar as my real entrance into the Congress politics. My attendance at the previous Congresses was nothing more perhaps than an annual renewal of allegiance to the Congress". Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, *op. cit.*, 1927, p.369.
27. The text of the treaty with Turkey was published along with a message from the Viceroy to the Muslim People of India urging them to accept "Terms which I fear will be painful to all Muslims. This message is cited in the Indian Annual Register—1921, Vol. I.
28. The findings of the Hunter Committee were so one-sided that it was not acceptable to the Indian members. The latter came out with a Minority Report which ruthlessly condemned the British authorities, military as well as civil. Gandhi condemned the Hunter Committee findings as "an attempt to condone official lawlessness" and said that it was "page after page of thinly disguised official whitewash". See *Young India*, 9 June, 1920. Also see CWMG, Vol.XVIII, p.482.
29. *Young India*, 29 September 1921.



30. Cited in S.R.Bakshi, Documents of Non-cooperation Movement ( Delhi, 1989), p.3.
31. However, there were some opponents too, namely, C.R. Das, B.C. Pal, Madan Mohan Malaviya, Joseph Baptista, M.A. Jinha and Satyamurti.
32. Navajivan, 3-11-1920. Also see CWMG, Vol. XVIII, pp.391- 95.
33. Navajivan, 28-11-1920. Also see CWMG, Vol. XIX, pp.39- 40
34. The Bombay Chronicle, 1-12-1920. Also see CWMG, Vol. XIX, pp.44-45.
35. Transcript of Interview with Smt. Renuka Ray, Oral History Section, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.
36. Cited in Aparna Basu, "The Role of Women in the Indian Struggle for Freedom", in B.R.Nanda, ed, Indian Women: From Purdah to Modernity (Vikas, Delhi, 1976), p.21.
37. Transcript of Interview with Vijaylakshmi Pandit, Oral History Section, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.
38. Transcript of Interview with Manmohini Seghal, Oral History Section, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.
39. Sukhbir Chowdhary, Indian People Fight for National Liberation, 1920-22 (Delhi, 1972), p.85.
40. CWMG, Vol. XVIII, p.20. It is, however, interesting to note that even for a dedicated Gandhian like Sarala Devi, shifting over to Khadi clothes in the initial stages was not very easy.
41. Sarala Devi Chaudharani, At the Point of Spindle (Ganesh and Company, Madras, 1922), p.3.
42. Radha Devi was the wife of Lala Lajpat Rai. Parvati Devi was a teacher in Amritsar who was firmly committed to propagating the Gandhian ideology of Swadeshi. She was arrested in Meerut in December 1922 for her provocative speeches which the British found highly objectionable.
43. See Aaj, 27 November, 1920. Also see S.R. Bakshi, op.cit., 1989, p.309.
44. The Tribune, 22 March, 1922.

45. CWMG, Vol.XIX, p.455. Also cited in Rajan Mahan, Women in Indian National Congress, 1921-1931 (Rawat Publications, Jaipur and Delhi, 1999),pp.149-50.
46. The Tribune, 1 October, 1921 and 21 January, 1922.
47. CWMG, Vol.XVII,pp.31-32. Gandhi also expressed satisfaction at the enthusiasm shown by the women of Rawalpindi.
48. H.N. Mitra, ed, The Indian Annual Register, 1921-22, Vol.I, Appendix I,pp.12-13.
49. Before the advent of Gandhi on the political scene of India, Gujarat had remained a politically backward area. See Mahadev Desai, Day to Day with Gandhi (Varanasi, 1968), Vol.III, p.108.
50. Anasuya Sarabhai ultimately divorced her husband, a rare thing in those times. She also studied in England where she got an opportunity to interact with George Bernard Shaw and Beatrice Webb. On her return to India, she opened a school for the children workers of Calico Mills owned by her family. She even opened crèches for the women workers of this mill.
51. Rajan Mahan, op.cit.,p155.
52. See Young India, 29-9-1920.
53. Gandhi said this during the course of his address to women at Kadivani in Ahmedabad on 3-10-1920. See Mahadev Desai, op.cit.,p.35.
54. Navjivan, 1-5-1921. Also see CWMG, Vol.XX,pp.,50-51.
55. Nandubehn was the wife of Dr. Balvantraai Kanuga, a close associate of Vallabhai Patel. Gandhi felt extremely happy at the role played by women as volunteers at the Ahmedabad Congress. See CWMG. Vol.XXII, pp.185-86.
56. Avantikabai Gokhale was married to a Bombay engineer, Baban Gokhale. She was born in 1882.
57. Usha Bala, Indian Women Freedom Fighters, 1857-1947 (Manohar, Delhi, 1986),pp.98-99. Also see Femina, 23 October-7 November,1982.
58. Grand-daughter of Dadabhai Naoroji, Perin Captain was born in 1888. She was married to D.S. Captain, a reputed lawyer. From 1920 she began to wear Khadi clothes and play an active part in popularizing the Swadeshi cause in association with her sisters, Goshibehn Captain and Khurshed Naoroji.

59. They belonged to the highly respected family of the Petits. This name is well known in Bombay in the form of Petit Library, Petit Hospital and other charitable institutions. Mithubehn later shifted to Surat and was actively associated with the Bardoli Satyagraha.
60. The Faizi Sisters, namely, Atiya, Zohra and Nazli were the first women members to have gone abroad for education. They played a significant role in popularizing Khadi among the Muslim women.
61. Manekbai Bahadurji was the daughter of Dr. Atmaram . Under the inspiration of Gandhi, she had learned to spin personally and tried to propagate the concept of spinning through the Sevasadan,
62. Sarojini Naidu was among the most devoted disciples of Gandhi who became the President of the Bombay Provincial Congress Committee and also of the Rashtriya Stree Sabha. She also became the President of the Indian National Congress in 1926.
63. See Gail Minault, *op.cit.*, 1989, p.180.
64. *Ibid.*
65. *Ibid.*, pp.180-181.
66. The Hindu, 8-4-1921. Also see CWMG, Vol.XIX, p.509.
67. Sudarshini, 16 July, 1922. Cited in Leela Kasturi and Vina Mazumdar, ed, *Women and Indian Nationalism* (Vikas, Delhi. 1994), p.113.
68. Cited in Rajan Mahan, *op.cit.*,p.160.
69. Leela Kasturi and Vina Mazumdar, *op.cit.*, p.113.
70. Atluri Murali, "Changing Perceptions and Radicalism of the National Movement in Andhra, 1922-1934", *Social Scientist*, Vol.16, No.8, pp.8-10.
71. M.Venkatarangaiya, *The Freedom Struggle in Andhra Pradesh, 1921-31* (Hyderabad, 1965),Vol.III,p.8.
72. Cited in Rajan Mahan, *op.cit.*, p.160.
73. Bharati Ray, "The Freedom Movement and Feminist Consciousness in Bengal, 1905-1929", in *idem*, *From the Seams of History: Essays on Indian Women* (OUP, Delhi, 1995),pp.193-94.

74. Cited in Bharati Ray, *op.cit.*, pp.194, fn.54 on the basis of personal interview with Kalyani Devi, daughter of Basanti Devi, on 19 April, 1983.
75. Amrita Bazar Patrika, 1922 (Report on the Native Newspapers of Bengal, West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta).
76. Shiva Pujan Sahay, Bihar Ki Mahilayen (Mahila Charkha Samiti, Patna, 1962), p.310.
77. Leela Kasturi and Vina Mazumdar, *op.cit.*, pp.162-63.
78. Samaj, 28 March 1921.
79. Ibid.
80. V.Rajendra Raju, Role of Women in India's Freedom Struggle (Delhi, 1994), p.29.
81. Rama Devi, Jeevan Pather (in Oriya) (Cuttack, 1984), p.53. Also see V. Rajendra Raju, *op.cit.*, pp.29-30.
82. Cited in Bina Kumari Sarma, "Gandhian Movement and Women's Awakening in Orrisa", The Indian Historical Review, Vol.XXI, Nos 1 & 2, edited by Anup Taneja (ICHR and Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1997), p.82.
83. See V.Rajendra Raju, *op.cit.*, p.33.
84. While emphasizing on the need to work on the Charkha and spinning everyday on a regular basis, Gopabandhu Das said to women: "Devote atleast six hours daily to spinning. It will keep your mind steady and pure. Mother India desires it from you". See Samaj, 27 August, 1921.
85. Samaj, 3 September, 1921.
86. "Our motherland is the rosary of our action and religion The spinning wheels, Our life's dearest companion? Sacrifice your life adhering to the Gandhian norms, present at the feet of the motherland. Floral tributes besmeared with blood. We shall break the enemy's labyrinth." See V.Rajendra Raju, *op.cit.*, p.42.
87. Ibid., p.36.
88. R.C. Majumdar, History of the Freedom Movement in India, Vol. III, p.178.
89. Cited in Bina Kumari Sarma, *op.cit.*, p.84.

90. The Bombay Chronicle, 20-7-1921. Also see CWMG, Vol.XX, pp.396-98.
91. Gail Minault, The Khilafat Movement, op.cit., 1981, pp.149-50.
92. Amrita Bazar Patrika, 9 January, 1920.
93. Aparna Basu, op.cit., p.22.
94. L.F. Rushbrook Williams, India in 1922 (Calcutta), p.222.
95. M.E. Cousins, The Awakening of Asian Womanhood (Ganesh & Co., Madras, 1922), pp.8 and 59-60.

## **CHAPTER - VI**

### **CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE MOVEMENT AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN**

The year 1928 proved to be a turning point in the national movement for India's independence because it was in the February of this year that Simon and his colleagues arrived in India. Since this was an all-White Commission in which no Indian was represented, the Congress passed a resolution to boycott the Simon Commission at every stage and in every form. All important leaders and parties boycotted the Simon Commission and wherever Simon and his colleagues went, they were greeted by hostile crowds who exhorted them to go back. Women also did not lag behind. Hansa Mehta<sup>1</sup> was actively associated with the demonstration which took place in the metropolitan city of Bombay. Several women's associations criticized the Commission on two counts – non-inclusion of Indians and also of women from it. The women of Bombay held a meeting under the Presidentship of Sarojini Naidu and passed a resolution for a vigorous struggle for complete Swaraj.

The British Government retaliated with utmost aggression, resorting to frequent lathi charges to curb the violent crowds. Leaders of the stature of Jawaharlal Nehru, Govind Ballabh Pant and Lala Lajpat Rai took the blows. but sadly, however, Lala Lajpat Rai, who was badly hit on his chest on 30 October could not survive. The blows inflicted on his body proved to be so serious that he finally succumbed to his injuries on 17 November 1928.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, India had lost one of its most venerated leaders in extremely unfortunate circumstances. The hostility shown by the Indian leaders to the Simon Commission definitely gave a big boost to the ongoing nationalist struggle.

Another important event to have taken place in the year 1928 was the Bardoli Satyagraha. This was launched under the leadership of Sardar Patel, with the basic

purpose of correcting an economic injustice done to the peasants because of the sudden and steep rise of government demand for land revenue

The Government of Bombay, contrary to the advice of the Joint Parliamentary Committee and contrary to the resolution of the Bombay Legislative Council of the Bombay Presidency in 1924, considerably enhanced the rate of rural taxation which was nominally 20 per cent but in actual application, in some instances over 60 per cent. The public felt that the increase was unwarranted and that an impartial committee to hold enquiry be constituted. The Government paid no heed.<sup>3</sup>

When, in order to register their strong protest against this repressive measure, people stopped paying the taxes, the Government resorted to measures like lathi charge, imprisonment, fines, auction of land, etc. But none of these measures could change the people's resolve.

Women also participated in the no-tax campaign which was started at Bardoli. However, they lacked leadership. The women who made their presence felt during the Bardoli Satyagraha were Smt. Mithuben Petit and Smt. Bhaktben Desai from Bombay. In order to stop the sale of lands by the Government, Sardar Patel had motivated Mithuben, Bhaktben, Maniben Patel<sup>4</sup> and other women to camp on those very lands by fixing their tents and huts on it. An unidentified woman donated an amount of Rs.200/- and promised to make donations on a regular basis till such time the Satyagraha lasted.

Besides being an eye opener to the people, the Bardoli Satyagraha "created a cadre of women leadership and a band of volunteers and workers. It bridged the gulf between the elite and the common women... Bardoli provided a spring board and the women and their organisations remained in the forefront of nationalist agitations both in 1930 and in 1942".<sup>5</sup> According to Mahadev Desai, "The heroism of the simple unsophisticated women of Bardoli", observed Mr. Desai, "was an inspiration to all women outside Bardoli".<sup>6</sup>

Bardoli Satyagraha also gave an indication to Gandhi that perhaps time was ripe for launching the non-violent Satyagraha on a big scale. Judith Brown is of the opinion that Bardoli Satyagraha was a big motivating factor for Gandhi to re-consider his political strategy. In contrast to Gandhi's shattered hopes of 1922, "civil disobedience might now be properly used by Indians en masse as the sanction behind their demands".<sup>7</sup> Gandhi himself had looked upon the Bardoli Satyagraha as a victory for truth and non-violence which had "almost restored the shattered faith in non-violence on the political field".<sup>8</sup>

In December 1928, the Congress at its annual session held in Calcutta "accepted the Nehru Report's 'dominion status' objective as its immediate goal with the proviso that if the government did not accept a constitution based on dominion status by the end of the year, the Congress would not only adopt Poorna Swaraj (complete independence) as its goal but would also be free to launch a civil disobedience movement to attain that objective".<sup>9</sup> However, the failure of the Government to consider the Nehru Report and the demand of the people, left the Indian National Congress with no other option but to go ahead with its plans of launching Satyagraha as per its decision taken at its session in December 1928 at Calcutta. Thus the Congress session held at Lahore in December 1929 turned out to be among the most memorable sessions of the Congress. In this historic session which was presided over by Jawaharlal Nehru, Poorna Swaraj was adopted as the only viable goal for which the Indians would have to make gigantic efforts. Nehru asserted : "We have now an open conspiracy to free this country from foreign rule and you, comrades, and all our countrymen and country women are invited to join it".<sup>10</sup> Gandhi was also convinced that the launching of civil disobedience was the need of the hour. In the words of S. Gopal, "Civil Disobedience was the only means of challenging both British rule, which appeared to him 'a personification of violence', and the growing hatred towards the agents of this rule, which took the form of casual assassination".<sup>11</sup>

### *Breaking of Salt Laws*

Gandhi was empowered to initiate the Civil Disobedience movement in any manner he thought appropriate. Since salt is one of the cheapest items used in every



house as a matter of routine, Gandhi decided to capitalize on this by breaking the Salt Laws. Moreover, Gandhi thought that the issue of salt would also appeal to the imagination of Indian women. Thus from March 1930, a new phase of Satyagraha had begun. Gandhi's plan was to walk all the way from his Ashram at Sabarmati to Dandi—a small village on the seashore situated at a distance of two hundred and forty-one miles from Sabarmati – and to make salt on the beach there. The idea was to defy the government monopoly in salt manufacture. Gandhi was of the opinion that since salt was a thing of common use, the Government was not justified in imposing salt tax because this would put additional burden on the meagre, financial resources of the poor. H.F. Owen rightly remarks: "His (i.e., Gandhi's) manufacture of salt in illicit circumvention of the tax on this dietary staple was the most flamboyant example of his concern to increase material and social welfare, which included improvement in the status of women..."<sup>12</sup>

On 12 March 1930, Gandhi, accompanied by 78 of his close associates, started his historic march from the Sabarmati Ashram. This march was a significant political event which appealed to the popular imagination. Dennis Dalton remarks :

The very notion of the march to Dandi exuded a 'come, join me' call for recruitment. Gandhi's methodical procedure of walking through dozens of villages, pausing regularly to hold public meetings, and covering the considerable distance of 241 miles in 24 days, may be seen, quite apart from the strength of the issue, as a massive political campaign.<sup>13</sup>

As was expected Gandhi was taken into custody on 6 April 1930 for violating the Salt Laws.<sup>14</sup> His arrest was the long-awaited signal and the campaign started with country-wide hartals.

Initially, Gandhi had begun his Dandi march by keeping the women out of the Salt march. This was a big disappointment for women. Margaret Cousins wrote a strong letter of protest to Gandhi :

In these stirring, critical days of India's destiny there should be no water-tight compartments of service. Women asked that no conferences, congresses or commissions dealing the welfare of India should be held without the presence of women. Similarly women must ask that no marches, no imprisonments, no demonstrations organized for the welfare of India should prohibit women from a share in them.<sup>15</sup>

Durgabai Deshmukh was also against the idea of excluding women from the Dandi march. In her letter of protest to Gandhi, she wrote that "we women should also be allowed to join".<sup>16</sup> Khurshedbhen, the grand-daughter of Dadabhai Naoroji, expressed her feelings of resentment to Gandhi, asking him as to why women were being prevented from breaking the Salt Laws.<sup>17</sup> Mridula Sarabhai, then a student at Gujarat Vidyapeeth, took the plunge in total defiance of the instruction of Principal Kaka Kalelkar not to do so.<sup>18</sup>

The main reason why Gandhi excluded women was his sense of chivalry.<sup>19</sup> Gandhi knew that if women were also present in the march, the British Government would feel inhibited to attack the procession, unless there was a big provocation. He thought that the inclusion of women would defeat the very purpose of Satyagraha and men would be accused of hiding behind the skirts of women.<sup>20</sup> Gandhi explained : "Just as Hindus do not harm a cow, the British do not attack women as far as possible. For Hindus it would be cowardice to take a cow to the battlefield. In the same way it would be cowardice for us to have women accompany us".<sup>21</sup> But seeing the women in a defiant mood, he ultimately gave his consent to their participation in the Satyagraha.

Though no woman was present during Gandhi's historic march to Dandi, yet they were present everywhere on the way to greet him and to hear him speak. On reaching Dandi, Gandhi convened a Women's Conference in which he placed before them the special role he had envisaged for women.<sup>22</sup> Gandhi exhorted women to concentrate on activities like picketing of liquor and toddy shops and stores selling foreign cloth. He said, "Drink and drugs sap the moral well-being of those who are given to the habit.

Foreign cloth undermines the economic foundations of the nation and throws millions out of employment. The distress in each case is felt in the home and therefore by women”.<sup>23</sup> He further encouraged them to wear khadi and to ply the charkha. On the basis of his past experience, Gandhi had known that women had the necessary patience to perform these tasks, though to many these seemed secondary.<sup>24</sup>

The majority of women present in the Conference felt extremely enthusiastic about the roles assigned to them, and in order to accomplish this they formed an organization for women in Gujarat. Mrs Tyabji and Mithubehn Petit became the President and Secretary respectively of this new organization, the main task of which was picketing of liquor and toddy shops and making personal appeals to the shop-owners to keep their shops closed.

Gandhi also brought out a pamphlet titled “How to do the Picketing”. As per the plan chalked out by Gandhi, the picketing team was to have nine women members and a leader. It was decided that before resorting to any actual picketing, the picketing team was to send a delegation to the owner requesting him to either close his shop (in case it was a liquor shop) or restrict sales, if it were a shop selling foreign cloth. And in case the owner refused to comply with their request, the women would start making appeals to potential customers. In the process of picketing, the women were required to wear a special uniform, carry banners and sing bhajans. Gandhi was very particular that the picketers should present themselves in a dignified manner and the use of indecent language was to be strictly avoided. Men were to keep themselves away from this activity – the idea being to make sure that no violence took place. Those women who for some reasons could not actively participate in the picketing activity, were asked to contribute their services in other ways like encouraging their neighbours to spin and wear khadi clothes and distribute pamphlets, etc. to make the Gandhian programme popular among the masses. Gandhi was also very particular that proper accounts and vouchers in respect of money spent by the picketing team should be maintained.

The major resolutions adopted at the Gujarat Women's Conference held at Dandi on 13 April 1930 are as follows:

(1) This Conference of the women of Gujarat assembled at Dandi on 13 April, 1930, having heard Gandhiji, resolves that the women assembled will picket liquor and toddy shops of Gujarat, and appeal to the shopkeepers and the shop-goers to desist from plying their trade or drinking intoxicating liquors as the case may be, and will similarly picket foreign cloth shops and appeal to the dealers and the buyers to desist from the practice of dealing in or buying foreign cloth as the case may be. (2) This conference is of opinion that boycott of foreign cloth is possible only through khadi and therefore, the women assembled resolve henceforth to use khadi only and will so far as possible spin regularly and will learn all the previous processes and preach the message of khadi among their neighbours, teach them the processes upto spinning, and encourage them to spin regularly. (3) This conference hopes that women all over Gujarat and the other provinces will take up the movement initiated at this conference.<sup>25</sup>

### *Emergence of Women in the Civil Disobedience Era*

The Civil Disobedience era occupies a very significant place in the history of women's role in the national movement because it was during the period, 1930-34 that women started emerging in a big way as speakers, marchers, picketers, etc. In fact, women's active association with the ongoing freedom struggle had started from the very first day of the commencement of the Salt Satyagraha. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay recalls :

I still have before me the fantastic scene of Chowpatty Sands in Bombay, the first day, April 6, 1930, when the salt law was broken. Instead of the tiny sands there was only a surging mass of humanity covering the sea face. The scene showed multitudinous women with water pots filled with salt water from the sea, little kids also carrying midget water pots, wending their way to their respective homes

to make salt and defy the law ... Here was an unacceptable law being broken with purposeful deliberation throughout the country by men, women and children .... Above all, the revolt had now entered every home, nestled down in the very hearth. Women, like men, were getting the first taste of liberation; for throwing off the shackles of fear marks the birth of freedom.<sup>26</sup>

## Gujarat

Shortly after the Women's Conference at Dandi, the Gujarati women, under the inspiration of Gandhi, made their intentions very clear. They wanted to be actively associated with the national movement. In a letter addressed to the Viceroy, the leading Gujarati women placed on record the following : "We the undersigned women of Gujarat, have come to the conclusion that we may not keep ourselves aloof from the great national upheaval that is taking place. We are in full sympathy with the civil disobedience campaign".<sup>27</sup> They made untiring efforts to involve as many Gujarati women as possible in the picketing activities, and to organize the sale of contraband salt all over Gujarat.

Gandhi's confidence in women's participation can be gauged from the fact that he had specially nominated Sarojini Naidu to lead a raid upon Dharasana Salt Works<sup>28</sup> in May 1930. Exhuming utmost faith in women's abilities to do big deeds, Sarojini Naidu said : "The time has come in my opinion when women can no longer seek immunity behind the shelter of their sex, but must share equally with their men comrades all the perils and sacrifices for the liberation of the country".<sup>29</sup> However, in contrast to the confidence shown by Sarojini Naidu, a few Congressmen expressed apprehensions about Gandhi's decision to make the former the leader of the Salt Satyagraha at Dharasana. The enthusiasm of Sarojini Naidu became further evident from her statement made to the press :

As is quite natural the sense of chivalry of my co-workers, particularly members of the Working Committee, was greatly perturbed at the idea of permitting me to undertake what by its very nature, must be an onerous task, but when on April 6<sup>th</sup>

Mahatma Gandhi nominated me as one of his successors I accepted all the implications of the risks as well as of the responsibilities of that high privilege. The leaders assembled at Allahabad also felt that it was inadvisable for me to undertake this task in view of the fact that my presence was needed for other equally important work elsewhere specially in connection with the Hindu-Muslim problem, but I felt that I cannot break the word, I have given to Mahatma Gandhi.<sup>30</sup>

It was on 15 May 1930 that Sarojini Naidu carried out the instructions of Gandhi by raiding the Dharasana Salt Works. The police did arrest Naidu and her associates, but they were set free the same day. On 21 May 1930, Sarojini Naidu led another batch of 2,500 raiders upon the same Salt Works. When the volunteers reached the barbed wire stockade which was guarded by the police, they were ordered to disperse. The volunteers, however, remained adamant and refused to carry out the orders of the police. The police then “rushed upon the advancing marchers and rained blows on their heads with their steel shaft lathes”.<sup>31</sup> The injured men were removed, and when other volunteers came, they also were badly beaten by the police. The volunteers then changed their tactics and occupied seats on the ground near the salt pans.

This too was not acceptable to the police and they were again asked to disperse. The volunteers again gave a deaf ear to the orders, and this was provocation enough for the police to resort to savage methods, kicking the “seated men in the abdomen and testicles”.<sup>32</sup> “The injured men writhed and squealed in agony, which seemed to inflame the fury of the police.... The police then began dragging the sitting men by the arms or feet, sometimes for a hundred yards and throwing them into ditches”.<sup>33</sup> Webb Miller, an American journalist who was present on the occasion, was horrified at the sight of “unresisting men being methodically bashed into a bloody pulp” and said that “I have never seen such harrowing scenes as at Dharasana”.<sup>34</sup>

Sarojini Naidu had anticipated that they would be beaten by the police, as can be seen from her following exhortation : “Gandhi’s body is in jail but his soul is with you.

India's prestige is in your hands. You must not use any violence under any circumstances. You will be beaten but you must not resist; you must not even raise a hand to ward off blows".<sup>35</sup> She was arrested the same day, that is, 21 May 1930. But this arrest did not dampen her spirits, as is evident from her message to her comrades : "Whatever happens, strictly adhere to the law of non-violence. Don't budge an inch from the place you have taken".<sup>36</sup> She also said : "I am making the most of this heaven-sent opportunity, I find something to bless, not to fear and regret".<sup>37</sup>

Mridula Sarabhai : The Dharasana incident went a long way in the active association of women with the Civil Disobedience movement in Gujarat, where perhaps the women's participation was the largest. In Sabarmati Ashram special classes were held to train women Satyagrahis. Mridula Sarabhai played an important role in popularizing the boycott of foreign cloth in Ahmedabad, where a Videshi Kapasa Bahishkar Samiti was formed whose President was Saraladevi Sarabhai and Secretary was Mridula Sarabhai. "It organized almost daily processions in which women wearing saffron coloured khadi sarees with volunteers' badges pinned on, singing patriotic songs, marched through the streets of Ahmedabad. They collected foreign cloth and made bonfires of them. They also distributed cyclostyled sheets throughout the city".<sup>38</sup>

The Rashtriya Stree Sabha launched an intensive campaign to make the concept of Swadeshi popular. Volunteers paid personal visits to different homes with the purpose of securing signatures for their firm commitment to Swadeshi. A picketing association was formed in Ahmedabad, the main centres of which were Maskatii Market, Panchkuwa Market and Ratan Pole, whose shops sold foreign cloth. Even godowns where foreign cloth was stored were not spared from picketing.<sup>39</sup> Trucks carrying foreign cloth were not allowed to proceed. A conspicuous feature of these activities was that men and women from different social backgrounds took part, including women from the families of Congressmen. Young girls and boys also did not lag behind. They made their contribution by organizing vanara senas with the object of securing information about shops which were dealing in the sale of foreign cloth. The vanara senas also helped the picketers by giving them prior information about the arrival of trucks carrying foreign

cloth or of the police. Credit goes to Mridula for being the first one to organize a vanara sena of children in Ahmedabad.

Children and women organized praphat pheries in the early mornings which moved round the city singing patriotic songs to the accompaniment of drums, bugles and manjiras (cymbals) and these became immensely popular. 'Dandi darya kinare Mohan mithun banave' (On the sea shores of Dandi, Mohan makes salt). 'Danko vagyo ladvaiya shura jagajo re' (the bell has sounded, brave warriors awake); 'jan jaye to java deho par tek no khojo re' (if you have to give up your life, do so, but do not give up the cause) as these lines reverberated through the cities and villages of Gujarat, they brought a new political awakening, specially among women.<sup>40</sup>

Saraladevi Sarabhai, President of the picketing association, wanted to make sure that the programme of boycott of foreign cloth which was started with so much of enthusiasm did not come to an end. She thus sent a circular letter to all the mill-owners and traders, urging them to avoid the use of imported cotton yarn, artificial silk yarn or wool, and to sell only swadeshi cloth. Since shops selling khadi cloth were not in existence in those days, women carried bundles of khadi cloth for different residential areas on Sundays and holidays.

All over Gujarat, women were in high spirits, selling the contraband salt, collected from Dandi and Dharasana, and singing in chorus, "we have broken the salt law which will wreck the British Empire".<sup>41</sup> They also raised slogans like "Holy Salt", "Gandhi Salt", "salt that will free India, come and buy".<sup>42</sup> Salt from Dandi and Dholera was distributed among the volunteers, including Mridula and Khurshedbhen, each of whom got a packet of one tola which was sold often for Rs.500/-.<sup>43</sup>

Once in May 1930 when a procession of women, carrying pitchers on their heads, was going to give water to the Satyagrahis, the police in a most unbecoming manner did not allow them to move forward and give water to the Satyagrahis in spite of the



scorching heat. The British authorities, in collaboration with Gholap, the district magistrate, ordered the troops on horses to ask the women to go away. When the seven hundred women present there offered resistance, the mounted troops resorted to lathi-charge.<sup>44</sup>

The incidents mentioned above amply demonstrate the sense of devotion and commitment of women to the Civil Disobedience movement. It would be interesting to note that all the women who participated in the movement in Gujarat were not educated or sophisticated, the most glaring example being that of Gangabehn Vaidya who had become a widow at the young age of sixteen. She met Gandhi in Bombay and was advised to learn spinning. She was so greatly influenced by Gandhi that later on she decided to stay in Sabarmati Ashram on a permanent basis and dedicate her life to the ultimate goal of India's independence. On 21 January 1931, she led a procession of 1,200 women in Borsad. "The procession was lathi-charged, Gangabehn was severely beaten up and bled profusely, but she did not give up the tricolour she was carrying. She was in and out of jail till 1934, when she settled in Bochasan doing constructive work in the rural areas".<sup>45</sup> This incident was one of the worst outrages on women which clearly indicates that the British brutality had assumed such serious proportions that even the women were not spared. In his letter of protest to the Viceroy, Gandhi stated :

On the 21<sup>st</sup> January a cruel, uncalled for and unchivalrous lathi-charge was made upon wholly innocent women and girls who were forming a procession which was marching to a women's meeting that was to be held in order to protest against the brutal treatment of a girl 17 years old by a police official. Neither the procession nor the meeting was prohibited.<sup>46</sup>

The majority of women who took part in the procession of Borsad were affiliated to the Sabarmati Ashram. Gandhi eulogized the courage displayed by these women saying that "the Ashram women have immortalized themselves and the Ashram".<sup>47</sup> He even went to the extent of saying, during the course of the meeting of Women's Indian

Council in London, that the heroic deeds of the Gujarati women had “converted the little town of Borsad into a Thermopylae”.<sup>48</sup>

Bombay : Bombay was another region where women were actively involved during the Salt Satyagraha and the Civil Disobedience movement. Among the prominent women leaders who had played significant roles in Bombay were Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Lilavati Munshi, Hansa Mehta, the Captain sisters Perinbehn and Goshibehn, Jaishri Raiji, Avantikabai Gokhale, Jankidevi Bajaj, and several others associated with the Rashtriya Stree Sabha.

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay was entrusted with the responsibility of leading the raid on the Wadala Salt Fields in the precincts of Bombay. Initially, however, Kamaladevi was apprehensive about Gandhi’s idea of breaking salt laws. She wondered “how this (civil disobedience) could be brought about by breaking the salt laws”. She opened out her mind to Jawaharlal Nehru and asked him if he could suggest some better method of carrying out civil disobedience. Nehru, however, had utmost faith in Gandhi’s decision and told Kamaladevi : “Gandhiji is a very intuitive person and his instincts are always fruitful. We are not always able to see what he feels, what he is leading up to, but usually he is able to achieve something and therefore we shall have to act accordingly”.<sup>49</sup> She had “visualised a mass raid embracing a large part of the city’s two million population. I was sure that no force, not even machine-guns could stop this raid”.<sup>50</sup> However, the raid on Wadala Salt Fields could not take place because one day before the scheduled date, the British authorities arrested Kamaladevi. She recalls that when she was arrested she was represented by her little son of seven, “who proudly carried the banner and engaged in the drama of his first battle”.

There were other freedom fighters of tender age. Johri of the Bombay Youth League organised youngsters into Vanar Senas (monkey brigades, named after the army that assisted the hero of the Ramayana epic), as twelve-year-old Indira Nehru did in Allahabad. Girls of 10 or 12 would sell prohibited literature. Women would duplicate illegal news sheets in kitchen and barn, act as

messengers, write on street walls the news of the day, and picket shops selling foreign cloth and liquor.<sup>51</sup>

Hansa Mehta,<sup>52</sup> Perin Captain<sup>53</sup> and Lilavati Munshi<sup>54</sup> played a prominent role in Bombay by going to different shop dealers and urging them not to sell imported cloth. Besides, the Satyagrahis made fervent appeals to the customers to refrain from making purchases. The first ten months of 1930 saw as many as 17,000 convictions of women; the closing of shops was declared an unlawful act and shopkeepers violating this began to be arrested along with the picketers.

Kamaladevi herself was taken into police custody under the vagrancy law when she refused to give her address. She did not want her colleagues to be put into trouble. K. Natarajan, the editor of the Indian Social Reformer, expressed his views forcefully when he came to know from his daughter about the inhuman treatment that was meted out to Kamaladevi in the prison. She was subsequently sifted to the 'B' class.

Kamaladevi and Aruna Asaf Ali, who came from affluent backgrounds, found life in jail a very rewarding and educative experience. This gave them a clear idea of the conditions in which the majority of women lived. Kamaladevi writes: "... a large number of women who were with me in prison came from very poor classes, poorer than the lower middle class.... I became more and more convinced how important it was to improve their economic life if their social life was to be improved – that it was not possible to think of merely trying to break caste, it was bound up with their poverty".<sup>55</sup>

Aruna Asaf Ali informs that the plight of prisoners in small towns and villages was much worse. "In the absence of toilets, the women would be marched out to the fields accompanied by male guards, outraging their sense of modesty".<sup>56</sup> In 1932, the police failed to draw a distinction between political prisoners and ordinary prisoners when they locked the political prisoners and the ordinary prisoners together in the same barrack in the Arthur Road Jail. The political prisoners registered their strong protest against this because several of the prisoners were prostitutes and this could be detrimental

to the health of the political prisoners. They were then shifted to another barrack. The inhuman attitude of the police also becomes evident from the fact that only infants under the age of three were allowed to remain with their mothers in jail. Other children were left on the streets.<sup>57</sup>

Expressing his concern about the inhuman treatment meted out to women prisoners in jail, Jawaharlal Nehru made the following observation :

The lot of our womenfolk in prison was especially hard and painful to contemplate. They were mostly middle-class women, accustomed to a sheltered life, and suffering chiefly from the many repressions and customs produced by a society dominated to his own advantage, by man. The call of freedom had always a double meaning for them, and the enthusiasm and energy with which they threw themselves into the struggle had no doubt their springs in the vague and hardly conscious, but nevertheless intense, desire to rid themselves of domestic slavery also. Excepting a very few, they were classed as ordinary prisoners and placed with the most degraded of companions, and often under horrid conditions. I was once lodged in a barrack next to a female enclosure, a wall separating us. In that enclosure there were, besides other convicts, some women political prisoners, including one who had been my hostess and in whose house I had once stayed. A high wall separated us, but it did not prevent me from listening in horror to the language and curses which our friends had to put up with from the women convict warders.<sup>58</sup>

Hansa Mehta and others formed the Desh Sevika Sangh which made noteworthy contributions by way of organizing picketing in different parts of Mumbai. This work was carried out by highly committed Desh Sevikas, who were clad in saffron sarees and white blouses. In the true Gandhian spirit, they wore only khadi clothes and spent most of the time in spinning the charkha. The picketing activities of the Desh Sevikas were so effective that many foreign cloth merchants gave an undertaking not to sell foreign cloth till such time the country's honour

and pride was restored. Seeing the dedicated manner in which the Desh Sevikas were carrying out their picketing activities, the government felt constrained to declare the Desh Sevika Sang an illegal organization. 59.

The Desh Sevikas organized a number of demonstrations that found wide coverage in the press and inspired women all over India. Forbes reports:

Processions of one to two thousand women, accompanied by their children, were not unusual at this time. Even larger numbers came to listen to speeches about swadeshi and freedom. The largest crowd celebrated Gandhi's birthday and the release from prison of three of the most important women leaders: Lilavati Munshi, Perin Captain, and Mrs. Lukanji. A mile-long chain of women, led by sevikas dressed in orange saris and carrying placards, numbered more than 5,000. Crowds of 10,000 assembled at both ends of this parade. These numbers could not be matched in other areas of India, but patriotic women everywhere emulated the spirit.<sup>60</sup>

#### *East Godavari District of Andhra Pradesh*

The women in the East Godavari District of Andhra Pradesh also took part in the Salt Satyagraha and the Civil Disobedience movement. Sambamurty, the district leader, initiated the Salt Satyagraha campaign in the East Godavari region. As a result of the inspiration provided by him, a number of women joined the procession to break the Salt Law at Chollangi, a coastal place in the district. The woman who played a prominent part in this campaign was Vedantam Kamaladevi of Kakinada, whose husband was very supportive and cooperative. Kamaladevi also encouraged her mother and young children to join the campaign as volunteers. She also visited other districts such as Vizagapatam with the purpose of motivating women to join the Salt Satyagraha. She was taken into police custody at Naupada in Vizagapatam District for violating the Salt Law and was imprisoned for six months. Her contribution was particularly commendable because despite having small kids, she was actively involved in the national movement.<sup>61</sup>

## *Madras*

The Salt Satyagraha at Madras was conducted under the leadership of T. Prakasam. After his arrest, it was Durgabai who assumed leadership. She led fifty volunteers to the sea coast to conduct the campaign. In order to popularize the campaign she visited many places like Chittoor, Guditturam, Tiruttani, Prani and Arcot in May 1930. Her sincerity of purpose, total commitment and, above all, her fiery oratory impressed the audience so much that she became their beloved leader. Lord Cunningham too hailed her as Sivamgi Durgabai – Durgabai, the Lioness.<sup>62</sup> On 26 May 1930 she was arrested and sentenced to one year's imprisonment which she spent in the Central Jail for women at Vellore.<sup>63</sup>

George Slocombe of the Daily Herald wrote in his despatch on the Wadala Salt raid : "... One of the raiders carried out her mission with quiet dignity, very impressive to behold. It was a woman who emerged from the crowd, climbed through the barbed wire and approached the salt mound, as if it were an altar and filled her sari with salt as part of some unknown ritual".<sup>64</sup>

## *Orissa*

In Orissa, the two important centres of Salt Satyagraha were Inchudi<sup>65</sup> in the Balasore district and Kujanga<sup>66</sup> in the Cuttack district. On 20 April 1930, the first batch of women Satyagrahis was led by Rama Devi and Malati Choudhury who went to Inchudi and openly manufactured salt there. Hundreds of women blowing conches followed them in a long procession in which volunteers from Gujarat and Bengal also participated.<sup>67</sup> As a result of the untiring efforts made by the women leaders in Orissa (who did door to door campaigning coaxing women to break Salt Laws), even illiterate women from the lower strata were drawn to their fold and came in large numbers. According to an estimate, as many as 1,500 rural women took part in the campaign.<sup>68</sup>

When the Satyagraha campaign at Kujanga received a setback because of the arrest of the prominent male leaders, women came out of the security of their homes and kept the movement alive. Displaying utmost courage, they toured the entire area “creating unbelievable enthusiasm among common men and Congress workers”.<sup>69</sup> The movement was considerably strengthened when Rani Bhagyavati of Kujanga Raj family joined the Satyagraha in June 1930.<sup>70</sup> Following her example, about 500 women came forward to break the Salt Law. At Gandakipur, the Rani of Paradip extended her support to the satyagrahis.<sup>71</sup> “Thus the presence of young and aristocratic women in processions, public meetings and the example of royal ladies manufacturing salt mobilized the masses to extend support to the movement. Rural women too discarded their purdah and welcomed the satyagrahis passing through their villages”.<sup>72</sup>

Kuntala Kumari Sabat, the celebrated poetess, social worker and freedom fighter from Orissa, made her contribution through writing books like *Sphulinga*, *Ahvana* and *Archana* which infused a revolutionary zeal and patriotic fervour among people.<sup>73</sup> Her poems became so popular that students began reciting them in public in order to motivate people to join the national movement in large numbers. Little wonder that the British Government decided to ban some of her works.<sup>74</sup>

The contributions made by the women of Orissa are all the more praiseworthy because they had to contend with the staunch opposition of their family members.<sup>75</sup> In her memoirs Rama Devi has mentioned the name of a widow named Susila of Rampur village who showed great courage in abandoning her home to join the Gandhian movement. To quote her : “... the courage of some spinsters was a matter of surprise and a fountain of hope that a country having such courageous women and girls could not be kept in bondage by any powers”.<sup>76</sup> The women were so firm in their resolve that even the atrocities committed by the police did not deter them from moving ahead in their mission. The example of satyagrahis who were returning from the Iram Salt Centre of Balasore aptly substantiates this. Seeing the satyagrahis, the police allowed the men to go and “charged women (700) with lathies inflicting blows on their backs and legs. But the women remained firm”.<sup>77</sup> Thus it would not be wrong to say that the nature of

participation of Oriya women in the Salt Satyagraha became the most remarkable feature of the Gandhian movement in Orissa.<sup>78</sup>

During the course of the Civil Disobedience movement, Gandhi had chalked out an elaborate programme for picketing shops selling liquor and foreign cloth.<sup>79</sup> He preferred women for these activities because of their inherent trait of non-violence. Gandhi wrote : “Who can make more effective appeal to the heart than women” ?<sup>80</sup> He believed that the Non-cooperation movement of 1921 could not register the desired impact because the job of picketing had been assigned to men who resorted to violence.<sup>81</sup>

Initially, seventeen women belonging to purdahnashin affluent families came forward as volunteers to organize the picketing of shops selling liquor and foreign cloth.<sup>82</sup> In Cuttack and Balasore, picketing was done mainly by women, “who stood in rows in front of liquor shops and pleaded with would-be purchasers to abstain from making purchases”.<sup>83</sup> They urged the shopkeepers to give a written undertaking that they would not sell foreign cloth. The women picketed only those shops, the owners of which refused to give undertakings. Thus, “women proved themselves indispensable as workers, organizers and actual fighters”.<sup>84</sup>

Oriya women from extremely traditional and conservative families who had never been out of purdah walked unveiled in public processions and also braved the concomitant discomforts of prison life. This gave them strength to give up both the purdah and their religious and caste prejudices. Some women who had participated in picketing came from a rich background and were accustomed to a life of leisure and comfort. Hitherto they had never visited such areas or left home unescorted. Their boldness therefore in visiting different places, approaching different people, facing lathi charge and imprisonment is highly commendable.<sup>85</sup>



In the Civil Disobedience campaign about 50 women had worked as volunteers.<sup>86</sup> Out of these, five, namely, Sarala Devi, Rama Devi, Malati Choudhury, Chandramani and Suryamani, courted arrest and were sent to the Bhagalpur, Vellore and Puri jails.<sup>87</sup> Government reports expressed grave concern at the boldness of women to picket despite the presence of police.<sup>88</sup> Gandhi was absolutely right when he said that if women had taken up constructive activities like picketing and specialized in them, they could have contributed more than men to the cause of the country's freedom.<sup>89</sup>

The opening session of the Karachi National Congress held in 1931 was a historic occasion for Oriya women. <sup>90</sup> This was addressed by Sarala Devi. About fourteen women delegates from Orissa graced the occasion by their presence and a poem titled "Tribute to Bhagat Singh" written by Kuntala Kumari Sabat was circulated among the members to instill in them the patriotic spirit.<sup>91</sup>

After the Civil Disobedience movement was called off, Gandhi remarked, "... the role women played in the freedom struggle should be written in letters of gold".

### *Bengal*

The conspicuous feature of women's participation in Bengal was that their activities were more radical and revolutionary than those of women in other regions. This was mainly because of the revolutionary ideology of Subhas Chandra Bose which inspired many young girls to associate themselves with the revolutionary party.

An annual report of the Police Administration observed :

Organized attempts, seldom successful, were made to hoist the Congress Flag on Government buildings in the mofussil. An increasing share of the work was taken up by women, both because it was becoming more difficult to find male recruits and because the presence of women-folk was calculated to prove an embarrassment to the police.<sup>92</sup>

The observation made above does not seem to be authentic for the reason that women did not join politics to embarrass the police. In fact the police authorities never took a lenient attitude towards women for their nationalist activities.

In Bengal, the organizations through which women took part in the Civil Disobedience movement were : Nari Satyagraha Committee (NRC), Mahila Rashtriya Sangh and Ladies Picketing Board. The Mahila Rashtriya Sangh, which was established in 1928, was the first formal organization which started mobilizing women for taking part in political activities. At the instructions of Subhas Chandra Bose, Latika Ghosh – an Oxford educated teacher – founded this organization, which worked in close coordination with the Congress. Though basically the NRC's ideological framework was radical-oriented, but in order to mobilize women, it emphasized the inherent religious nature of Indian women. Latika Ghosh tried to awaken the women's consciousness through writing articles. She told her readers that they were the embodiment of the Supreme Shakti and tried to infuse in them Divine Love for their motherland. She wrote: "Every one of you must be like a spark which will burn down all selfishness, all petty dreams – purified by fire, only the bright, golden love of the Motherland will remain."<sup>93</sup>

The women of Calcutta formed the Nari Satyagraha Samiti (NSS) in 1922 in response to the Congress call for women to prepare themselves for serving the nation. Urmila Devi and Jyotimoyee Ganguli were named the President and the Vice-President respectively of this organization. Santi Das and Bimal Protibha Devi were the Joint Secretaries. "This group had a core of fifteen to twenty women who were willing to picket and risk arrest. They were all Bengali women belonging to the three highest castes: brahmins, kayasthas, and vaidyas. They were educated, from professional families, and had all observed some form of purdah. They chose white khaddar saris as their uniform".<sup>94</sup>

During 1930 women took out their own processions in Calcutta and also led them and addressed meetings. Jyotimoyee Ganguli held one such meeting at Naughat in

defiance of a prohibitory order. A ten year old boy, who was badly thrashed by the police, was lying unconscious on her lap. In order to associate herself whole-heartedly with the Civil Disobedience campaign she resigned from her Government job. Nishtami Devi also addressed a meeting in Calcutta. As a result of these efforts, middle-class women, who normally remained confined within the four walls of their homes, came out in the open and appeared as satyagrahis. Among them Bina Das was extremely popular. She was the one who fired a pistol at Governor Jackson. Bina's elder sister Kalyani and some other students formed the Chattri Sangha (Association for Female Studies). When Gandhi announced the commencement of Civil Disobedience in 1930, Kalyani played an active part by leading the Chattri Sangha girls in a demonstration outside Bethume College. When Nehru was arrested, these students demanded the closure of the College. When Mrs Das, the Principal, did not pay heed to their demand, they went on a strike.<sup>95</sup>

In 1931, when Kalyani was addressing a meeting at Hazra Park, she was arrested by the police and was "locked in an underground cell without saris, bedding, or a mosquito net, and given only three mugs of water per week".<sup>96</sup>

Santi and Suniti, two school girls from Comilla, shot Magistrate Stevens to death on 14 December 1931.

From this date women crowded into unprecedented roles and actions in quick succession. Pritilata Waddedar led the attack on the Chittagong European Club, Kalpana Dutta jumped bail and disappeared underground with Surya Sen's band of absconders, Bina Das fired on the Bengal Governor Anderson at a Calcutta University convocation function.<sup>97</sup>

Thus in contrast to the earlier times when women had extended support to the revolutionaries indirectly (by collecting funds, providing them hiding and transport facilities, etc.), they now became directly involved in revolutionary activities. The women of Bengal were thus actively associated with the Civil Disobedience movement, though their modus operandi was somewhat different.

At the time when the Satyagraha movement was commenced, Gandhi, in an open letter addressed to the women of India, asked them to contribute to the National movement through participation in the boycott of foreign cloth and intoxicants. This would in turn encourage the production of hand-made cloth. And Gandhi believed that this could be achieved if women started devoting "every available minute to the spinning of yarn".<sup>98</sup> He further said that in order to curb the Civil Disobedience movement the British authorities might go to any extent like inflicting bodily injuries, etc. Gandhi's advice therefore was that women should continue moving forward in their chosen path with utmost determination and be prepared for all eventualities. He said : "To suffer such insult and injury would be their pride. Such suffering it comes to them will hasten the end".<sup>99</sup> The women of Bihar responded well to Gandhi's call and came forward in considerable numbers to involve themselves in "breaking Salt Laws and forest laws, taking out praphat pheris and processions, picketing schools, colleges, legislative councils and clubs. These women who had already been feeling the pulse of a new life now came forward courageously in the 'world's broad field to share with men, the struggles, and joys in the country's battle for liberty'".<sup>100</sup>

Shailabal Devi, wife of a Congress leader in Santhal Parganas District, made successful efforts to mobilize women at meeting and made fervent appeals to them to violate the Salt Laws.<sup>101</sup> In Shahabad District, Mrs Rambahadur led a group of women to manufacture about a chattak of salt in front of the police station.<sup>102</sup>

In Bihar women achieved remarkable success in picketing of both liquor and foreign cloth shops. Two women, namely MrsHasan Imam and Vindhyavasini Devi played a prominent part in this respect. Under the leadership of the former, a women's committee was formed in Muzzafarpur for propagating the Swadeshi concept through spinning activity.<sup>103</sup> In Patna, under the leadership of Mrs. Hasan Imam, women went

“through the streets urging shopkeepers not to deal in foreign cloth”.<sup>104</sup> Vindhyavasini Devi also took an active part in this campaign.

In order to curb the Civil Disobedience campaign, the Government began taking repressive measure by arresting the Satyagrahis. In Bihar also several women were taken into police custody. “The first two women to be arrested were Saraswati Devi, the President of Hazaribagh District Congress Committee and Sadhana Devi who was the daughter of a professor of physics in Hazaribagh. In July 1930 Mira Devi of Giridih subdivision was arrested for her participation in the movement. The daughter of a professor in St. Columbus College at Hazaribagh, Mira Devi was the third woman to be arrested”.<sup>105</sup>

### *Delhi*

The success of Gandhi’s appeal to women lay in the traditional idioms and images which he frequently used. This drew the masses towards him, and the response of women was particularly overwhelming during the Civil Disobedience movement. In Delhi, as elsewhere, picketing was one area of activity where women were drawn in large numbers.

A news item in The Hindustan Times read : “Lady volunteers parade cloth market – The lady volunteers paraded the Delhi cloth market today and warned the dealer’s that if they imported foreign cloth, they will do so at their own risks for in that case ladies would resort to picketing of their shops”.<sup>106</sup> Picketing was not merely confined to shops selling foreign goods, foreign cloth and liquor but also it was directed towards the financial institutions which were aiding in the sale of foreign goods. A caption, “Picketing of Banks Campaign” contained the following elaboration :

Dr. Mrs. Vedi, Dictator of the Delhi Congress Committee has in view of the representation made by various constituents of the three local European banks which are alleged to be furthering the sale of foreign cloth decided to put off the

picketing of these banks for some time. She considers the request of the depositors that they would withdraw their money at their earliest convenience from these banks as reasonable.<sup>107</sup>

Apart from the daily newspapers like The Hindustan Times, details about the foreign cloth picketing are also available in Delhi Satyagraha Report, 1930 and All India Congress Committee Papers, particularly the ones pertaining to Delhi Pradesh Congress. There were a number of cases where women volunteers bore the brunt of police lathi charge and were put behind the bars. Picketing in Delhi proved to be very effective in curbing the sale of foreign cloth. "On the whole, we can safely say that not a yard of foreign cloth is being sold openly in Delhi and every effort is being made to reduce leakage to the minimum".<sup>108</sup>

Very inspiring and provocative speeches were made by some of the women leaders in Delhi. In one of the public meetings held at Delhi grounds, various women leaders were arrested. The meeting began under the chairmanship of Dr. Mrs. Vedi. On a purely peaceful meeting the police indulged in repeated lathi charge and arrested all the women leaders who came to the dais to speak. In a very lucid and provocative speech, Mrs. Sen Gupta<sup>109</sup> said that the government was gloating over the alleged fact that the Civil Disobedience movement was weakening. She pointed towards the guardians of law and order and enquired whether the government's allegation was true, five hundred policemen armed with lathis and rifles had been sent to disperse a meeting of peaceful people.<sup>110</sup> In this meeting, some of the prominent leaders who were arrested were Mrs. Sen gupta, Dr. Mrs. Vedi, Smt. Kausalya Devi (younger sister of Satyawati) and Raj Rani.<sup>111</sup> Police brutalities on the peaceful demonstrators took a very serious turn when a woman at Shamli who was beaten and arrested, had a miscarriage. To stifle public opinion arising from her case, police resorted to more brutalities. She was ill-treated in Jail and was separately confined to induce her to apologize. Her complaint against the S.O. Shamli was shelved. She later on developed lunacy symptoms and was sentenced to Benaras Mental Prison.<sup>112</sup> Her case was brought to public attention by local newspapers.

The students of Indraprastha College also played an active part in the national movement. They participated in peaceful activities like hoisting the national flag in the college premises, and singing the national songs.<sup>113</sup> IP College became a centre of controversy because its distinguished Principal was Miss Gminer, an Australian who was a theosophist and an ardent follower of Annie Besant. The Chief Commissioner of Delhi threatened to withdraw the official grant to the Indraprastha Institution unless Miss Gminer put an end to her political activities. However, Babu Jugal Kishore, the founder of the Institution, accepted the challenge and appealed to the public for funds to make up for the loss resulting from withdrawal of Government grant.<sup>114</sup>

Seeing the active involvement of women in the national movement, the British Administration felt constrained to devise various strategies to curb the women agitators. In a letter to W.W. Emerson, Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, a special officer of the Political Department wrote :

Any measure which may have the effect of stopping women from participating in the next movement is strongly suggested by this government. Apart from the undesired effects politically of imprisoning women picketers or boycotters, there will be a difficulty in providing jail accommodation if their number is large. It is, therefore, in every way desirable that women participants in the movement should be fined and the fines should be recoverable from their husbands, parents or guardians.<sup>115</sup>

Thus, the British authorities were aware that the increasing involvement of women had the potential for creating serious problems in the future. They feared that they would arouse public sympathy both within and outside India, particularly if they continued resorting to inhuman and brutal tactics like lathi charge and beating of women, etc. Hence orders were passed by the Home Department to various provinces and all the local governments to avoid using force wherever possible especially at places where women

were assembled and to avoid taking any measure which would give opportunity for charges of indecent behaviour against government servants.<sup>116</sup>

The letter from the Chief Commissioner of Delhi, Sir John Thompson, to the Secretary of the Government of India, also reflect the seriousness of the problem :

The problem of dealing with the numbers of women demonstrators is a new one in India and an Indian government would be much qualified to deal with it than we are as they would be free from the odium which attaches to a foreign government when it employs what is called repression.... It has been suggested to me that one way in which this can be done is to get people of respectable position to visit the families from which women workers are likely to come & bring pressure and persuasion to bear on them. Another method which I've long been considering is to make use of the untouchables (females wherever possible) for dealing with women picketers. Picketing by women and the participation by women in demonstrations, I regard as a very grave menace unless some method of dealing with it is devised and I consider the experiment with the untouchables is well worth making.<sup>117</sup>

Wanting to kill two birds with one stone, he further wrote:

The Congress party with its professed affection and sympathy for this class can hardly raise objections. The depressed classes look to the government to champion their interests and the enlisting of their assistance in the maintenance of order would be a measure tending to their uplift.<sup>118</sup>

Women also played a very significant part in the propagation of khadi. Apart from paying house to house visit for securing temperance pledge, they also went to temples and Jamuna Ghats where they successfully prevented people clad in foreign cloth from entering the temples and bathing in the holy river. They resorted to picketing at the famous Hanuman Mandir and allowed only khadi-clad people to enter the temple.<sup>119</sup> In



1930, Delhi had more than 300 women volunteers affiliated to the Congress. Age did not seem to dampen the spirits of women who were committed to the nationalist cause. This is aptly demonstrated by the message given by Kamaladevi's aged mother :

My hope has been fulfilled to see my dearest Kamla in prison as a result of her services in the cause of the country is the proudest privilege in my old age. Though age prevents me from entering the arena, the task will be completed and I feel confident that it will be done. I'm happy because the pretensions of the tyrant have been exposed as he has now come out in true colours by the persecution of women who love their country. Wherever I've travelled, I've witnessed an unprecedented upheaval. Everywhere one hears of liberty and liberty alone. All this portends the end of British rule in India.<sup>120</sup>

During the Civil Disobedience movement in the 1930s when most of the active male leaders were in Jail, it were the women leaders of the Congress who kept the movement alive through speeches and organization work.<sup>121</sup> Notable examples are those of Mrs Kohli, Atma Devi<sup>122</sup> and Parbati Devi.<sup>123</sup>

### *Satyawati's Contribution*

Maternal granddaughter of Swami Shraddhanand, Satyawati Devi (1907-45), played a significant role in the Civil Disobedience movement in Delhi during 1931-32.

At the time when Gandhi launched his Satyagraha campaign against the Rowlatt Bills in 1919, Delhi emerged as a crucial centre of nationalist politics. On 30-3-1919, Swami Shraddhanand exhibited great courage in countering the public bayonets and in challenging the soldiers to fire at him. The fortitude displayed by him made the police jittery and they soon retreated peacefully.<sup>124</sup> Hundreds of people who were present on the occasion were deeply impressed by the bold and unflinching attitude of Swami Shraddhanand. Also present among the crowd was a young girl of eleven, Satyawati, who was at that time a student of Indraprastha Girls' School which was already a centre

of political activities in Delhi. Her mother's name was Ved Kumari. Like her maternal grandfather, Satyawati too was absolutely fearless.

Tall and slender, Satyawati with her charismatic personality and fiery oratory was able to mobilize and motivate women of Delhi to participate in the national movement, the most glaring example being that of Aruna Asaf Ali. To quote Aruna :

Had it not been for Satyawati, I wonder if I would have ventured out of my sheltered domestic life, notwithstanding that my husband was a prominent Congressman who had already gone through the baptism of imprisonment in the non-cooperation movement of the twenties and was now again in the thick of the Civil Disobedience movement. I had just come out of a college run by foreign missionaries. With my westernised habits I doubted whether I could adjust my way of life and my values to those expected of Satyagrahi. But Satyawati's burning zeal was infectious. I was drawn to her and could not stay away from the great fight.<sup>125</sup>

Students in particular, especially the boys and girls of the Hindu College and the Indraprastha Girls' School, readily came forward to extend their support to Satyawati. Housewives, who had never before taken part in political activities, came out in the open at Satyawati's call. Memo Bai, a widow, also joined the movement. Gradually, she gained in confidence and became a constant companion of Satyawati. Soon Satyawati's name became a household word and women from orthodox families also jumped into the fray.<sup>126</sup> She organized many meetings in Delhi and among the prominent women who joined the movement at Satyawati's call were Saraswati Gadodia, Parvati Didmania, Damyanti Sahni, Chand Bibi, Chand Kohli and Aruna Asaf Ali.

During the Civil Disobedience movement leading Congressmen encouraged their wives, daughters and even mothers to involve themselves in the national movement. Swarup Rani, wife of Motilal Nehru, Vijaylakshmi Pandit, Kamla Nehru and her mother Rajpati Kaul, Lado Rani Zutshi and Manmohini Sehgal belonged to the families of

prominent leaders.<sup>127</sup> In Delhi also, women from the families of well known Congressmen such as Professor Indra, Deshbandhu Gupta, K.D. Kohli, J.N. Sahni, Dr Yudhvir Singh, Jugal Kishore Khanna, Gopinath Aman, Ganda Mal Sharma, Nand Lal Mehta, Thakur Hukum Singh, Phool Chand Jain and Asaf Ali joined the national movement. Aruna Asaf Ali writes : "Women's participation with men in India's mass movement is perhaps without a parallel in the world. I am convinced that had we women kept away from this exciting and crucial movement against imperialist rule, we would have remained backward".<sup>128</sup>

On 26 January, 1930 at the time when Independence Day was being celebrated under the auspices of the Nav Jawan Bharat Sabha of Delhi, Satyawati, the Vice-President of the Sabha, her mother Ved Kumari and Parbati Devi went from door to door with the purpose of mobilizing women. During February-March 1930 around sixty women's meetings were held in different wards of the city.<sup>129</sup> A special feature of these meetings was that they were organized by women and attended by women. Aruna Asaf Ali informs that during the launching of the Civil Disobedience movement, Chandni Chowk and the innumerable lanes and by-lanes around it "began to resound with patriotic songs and slogans raised by us during the prabhat pheris (early morning processions). As the day advanced, there would be picketing of shops selling foreign cloth and liquor, and street-corner meetings in defiance of prohibitory orders". She further says :

Delhi being land-locked, Satyawati and some of us decided to break the salt law by assembling in a marshy vacant plot in Shahdara, a suburb where the sub-soil water had a high salt content. About 50 of us made illegal and muddy salt, of which we made packets for distribution rather like *prasad* (consecrated offering). This went on for 10 days, after which the police swung into action. The Satyagrahis were dispersed with lathi blows and tear-gas shells, and several were arrested. But each act of repression steeled us. When a fellow volunteer was arrested, we felt thrilled and awaited our turn with eager anticipation.<sup>130</sup>

On 11 April 1930, a meeting of women was held in the Rang Mahal where it was resolved to picket shops selling foreign cloth. As many as seventy women belonging to respectable families offered their services as volunteers and took part in a procession to Chandni Chowk under the command of Satyawati. These women took their places outside the shops selling foreign cloth to the utter surprise of the shopkeepers. The enthusiasm shown by women volunteer popularized the movement so much that the next day the number of women volunteers swelled to two hundred. They marched through the city, picketing the centres of foreign cloth market. They could be seen on their posts of duty from 8 A.M. to 8 P.M. in the scorching heat. Picketing had become so popular that thousands of people would come daily to boost the spirits of the picketers.

On 13 April 1930, a meeting of women volunteers was held, where the following office-bearers were elected<sup>131</sup>: Satyawati, Commander; Mrs. Vedi, President; Mrs Sahni and Mrs Rajpati Kaul, Vice-Presidents; Mrs Gadodia, Treasurer; and Mrs Kohli, Secretary. The following women were appointed as Captains; Shrimati Parbati Devi; Memo Bai; Jai Rani; Kanti Devi; Ved Kumari; Mrs Sahni; and Mrs Kohli.

After picketing the shops selling foreign cloth, the women now directed their attention to the picketing of liquor shops. A meeting presided over by Satyawati was held on 4 May 1930 during which it was decided to start the picketing of liquor shops from 5 May. The meeting was surrounded by a strong police contingent of about 200, carrying lathis. This was the first meeting which was conducted under the strict surveillance of the police.<sup>132</sup> The women, however, remained undaunted and exhibited exemplary courage.

The 6<sup>th</sup> of May 1930 was a day of great importance for the women's movement in Delhi. A peaceful procession of no less than a lakh of people including five thousand women paraded the streets as a mark of protest against the arrest of Mahatma Gandhi. From Kashmiri Gate, a batch of two hundred women, young and old, led by Satyawati, went to the District Courts and demanded the immediate closure of the courts. After some time the police resorted to severe lathi charge inside Kashmiri Gate, which was

followed by another lathi charge on the ladies present outside the Courts. Mrs Sahni, Kaushalya Devi, Rajpati Kaul and Satyawati received injuries. Mary Campell, a temperance worker in India, described her amazed reaction in the Manchester Guardian as she watched picketing day after day : "The hefty policemen arrived with police vans and warned the women to go away. I thought that these delicate, sheltered women would give in now; they would never endure being touched by a policeman. But they did, and as fast as one relay was arrested another took its place. Altogether about sixteen hundred".<sup>133</sup>

Nowhere in India was Section 144 so openly violated as by the women of Delhi. Though as a result of frequent firing and lathi charge by the police the movement received a big setback, yet Satyawati continued working relentlessly for the noble cause. On 13 May 1930, she led a small procession of 30 women which paraded the city in total defiance of Section 144. The next day a mass meeting was organized in the Azad Park by the women. Four hundred policemen, sawars, riflemen and others helped by a dozen officers surrounded the meeting but the women remained unruffled and the proceedings were held with Satyawati in the Chair. When she was addressing the gathering of women, Senior Suptd., CID, asked her "who is responsible for the meeting"? "I am responsible", Satyawati promptly replied. The women remained firm in their resolve and the police had to retreat. This open defiance of law by women under the leadership of Satyawati finally led to her arrest.

At her trial in Delhi, Satyawati remarked :

We have abandoned our homes and children to redeem our motherland from foreign bondage, and neither the threat of the dungeons nor of bullets and the merciless beatings can deter us from the duty which we owe to ourselves and the coming generation. I and thousands of my sisters are ready to suffer, but we must win India's freedom.<sup>134</sup>

On 24 May 1930, Delhi witnessed a huge procession to bid farewell to Satyawati to the Kotwali. At the Clock Tower, thousands of people sang patriotic songs. She was sentenced to six months' simple imprisonment under Section 148. In a parting message she said: "So long there was even a single child she would not let the government rest, nor would she rest herself".<sup>135</sup> The written statement made by Satyawati after her arrest in the Court of Additional DM, Delhi, speaks volumes for her indomitable courage and firm resolution to secure freedom for her motherland:

I am required to furnish security against seditious speeches. This is the telling indictment of the foreign domination which has compelled the traditionally meek and secluded womanhood of India to cast aside the habits and customs of ages. And to join the ranks of those who are fighting for the birthright of India's toiling millions. I may be tried and cast aside into a nameless prison today but the foreign domination had already been tried at the bar of public opinion and the verdict has gone forth. In India, it is the first time since the days of Rani Laxmi Bai, our great woman warrior ancestor that we have abandoned our home and children to redeem our motherland from foreign bondage and neither the threat of dangers nor of bullets and merciless beatings can deter us from the duty which we owe to ourselves and the coming generation. I and thousands of my sisters are ready to suffer but we must win India's freedom.<sup>136</sup>

Her arrest inspired new life in Delhi, especially among the women, who made the Delhi Jail their place of daily pilgrimage as long as their leader was there. Hundreds of women, young and old, rich and poor, came out in the open and expressed their willingness to follow the example of Satyawati.<sup>137</sup>

On 26 November 1930, Satyawati was released after serving a term of six months and was given a unique reception in the city. Her mother, Ved Kumari, and thirteen other ladies were also released in the same week and rejoined the movement.<sup>138</sup> In 1932, Satyawati became immensely popular in the political circle of Delhi through various activities like enrolling lady volunteers, distributing posters, and organizing the Swadeshi

league. She continued helping the Congress secretly and assumed Congress leadership in Delhi. She had also been helping the revolutionaries financially and arranged for the publication of a leaflet titled "The Memorial Day of the Brave Sardar Bhagat Singh". She was again sent to prison on 21-4-1932 for leading a procession on the Jallianwala Bagh Day and released in September 1933. She again resumed her work through her association with the Achut Sevak Sangh and Dalit Sudhar Sabha, Delhi. She was also actively associated with Navjawan Bharat Sabha, Jatindra Das Union, Gandhi Ashram, Riyasi Praja Mandal, Students Harijan League and Bharat Mitra Mandal.<sup>139</sup> Besides, she was also involved in the organization of two political bodies – The Matri Mandal and Mahila Hindustani Seva Dal. She was again convicted on 26-1-1934 for being a member of an illegal assembly. She was released on 10 February 1934. In the same year, she became an important member of the Congress Socialist Party, Delhi and was elected Propaganda Secretary of the District Social League, Delhi; President, Delhi Congress Committee; and presided over the Provincial Congress of the Socialist Party.<sup>140</sup> Satyawati was the Chairman of the reception committee when the Congress Socialist Party held its annual conference at Meerut, near Delhi, in 1936. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, who presided, was greatly impressed by her. She remarked : "The thing I remembered the most about the session isn Satyawati".<sup>141</sup>

However, her frequent arrests and the hard life that she led both within the jail and outside, took their toll and she fell victim to tuberculosis. She left for her heavenly abode on 21-10-1945. Paying tributes to the departed soul, Jawaharlal Nehru said during a speech in Delhi on 3-11-1945:

With feeling I refer to the death of Shrimati Satyawati. Her image is before my eyes. I had despaired of her life, when I saw her in the hospital. I want the people of Delhi to erect a befitting memorial in her honour. I am not in favour of a memorial of stone. I am in favour of earmarking a good amount out of the purse presented to me for Shrimati Satyawati's memorial.<sup>142</sup>

The important role played by Satyawati for the emancipation of the country and in mobilizing the women, students, workers and peasants of Delhi shall always remain fresh in the minds of the Indian people. Her firm commitment and dedication become evident from the following statement made by her barely nine months before her demise: "Brothers and comrades; you should take a vow that you will make every possible sacrifice for the emancipation of our poor country – that no oppression or tyranny may sever us from our path; and that we may continue our struggle till our country is completely free".<sup>143</sup> Among the nationalist women of Delhi, Satyawati occupies unique position because she was the one who provided dynamic leadership to women and infused in them the patriotic spirit. In one of the Congress Bulletins it has been reported that :

In recent years Delhi has not produced a greater leader and organizer of women, she was inspiration personified and all the praise Mahatma Gandhi lavished on Delhi in the matter of boycott of foreign cloth was entirely due to her .... Young in years, she had an inexhaustible fund of enthusiasm and energy and even capable men fighters for India's freedom will find in her example a fit object of envy.<sup>144</sup>

### ***Memo Bai's Contribution***

Memo Bai, an eminent Gandhian freedom fighter, whose name figured quite often in the columns of The Hindustan Times of 1930s got herself enrolled as a Congress worker in 1930.<sup>145</sup> Repeated references to her arrest during the Civil Disobedience days when picketing of foreign cloth was in full swing, point to her active involvement in the national movement. She was often referred to as Captain of lady volunteers.<sup>146</sup>

She was born in an affluent family of Delhi and was married at an early age of ten. Barely a few years after her marriage her husband died and she came back to her parents' home, where she spent the rest of her life. All her family members joined the Congress in 1919. She was influenced a great deal by Satyawati's lecture in her colony



(katra). She got around one hundred pledges for swadeshi filled up. She was also associated with the Hindustani Seva Dal. Memo Bai actively participated in the Civil Disobedience movements of 1930 and 1932-34, during the course of which she was imprisoned several times. She was in charge of Delhi Cloth Market and conducted the picketing activities there. Some other women of Delhi who worked in cooperation with her were Gori Bai, Lacho Bai, Mrs. Hardayan Singh, Chamali Devi from Karol Bagh and Dr. Sharda. She also mentioned names of some shops of Delhi where picketing was done : Pandit Brothers, Mohan Brothers, Parmeshwari Das, Gujju Mal Nikku Mal.<sup>147</sup> In Delhi, there were some pockets from which a large number of women participated during the Civil Disobedience movement. Memo Bai informs that the main pockets were : Katra Neel, Bazar Sita Ram, Subzi Mandi and Karol Bagh.<sup>148</sup> Memo Bai also testifies to the participation of the students and teachers of Indrapratha School in the Civil Disobedience movements. Two permanent students of the School, Chameli and Shakuntala, who were the sisters of Raghunandan Saran played an active part in the movement after the arrest of Gandhi in 1933. In Lahore Jail, Memo Bai along with Satyawati and other women unfurled the national flag and sang patriotic songs. Memo Bai informs that around one hundred women in the entire Delhi were jailed in 1930 during the course of liquor and foreign cloth picketing.<sup>149</sup> Some of the Muslim women who were active in the movement were Mrs Kidwai, Sardari Bano and Mrs Anes Kidwai.

When the movement was not on, women did other type of work like going to villages and talking to people about cleanliness, about women's education, etc. They also used to lecture them on foreign cloth, spread the use of charkha, and opened charkha committees and charkha clubs. Main composition among women who participated in the movement came from the middle class. According to Memo Bai, most of the women from rich classes preferred not to go to jails. Otherwise they did help in the movement. She mentioned some of the names of women from rich classes such as daughter-in-law of Kalgujiya Shri Ram, wife of Daulat Ram Jewellers. Amba Devi and Mrs. Gidodia. Memo Bai also said that there were some women from rich families too who went to jail. She gave a rough estimate of total membership of women's congress committee in Delhi around 1932. It was around 250. Though herself a Gandhian she did help some

revolutionary women like Durga Devi Vohra and Sushila Mohan during the course of the movement.

### *Subhadra Joshi's Contribution*

Another woman of Delhi in the Gandhian mould was Subhadra Joshi.<sup>150</sup> Born in 1919 in an affluent family, she spent her earlier days in Punjab. At the time of her birth, her father was Inspector General of Police. She was greatly inspired by her father who took an active part in the movement of foreign goods. As the Civil Disobedience movement gained in momentum, he left his job and went to Sialkot in Punjab. Because of his active association with the Civil Disobedience movement, he was arrested and sent to jail for some time. After his release, he tried his hand in business but could not succeed. He again joined the police as Superintendent in Jaipur.

After a few years of initial schooling, both Subhadra Joshi and her elder sister Kaushalya were sent to Lahore for studies. It was in Lahore that Subhadra and her sister got involved in politics. Her sister was a student of Class IX of Lady Mcladen's School when she started taking part in processions and demonstrations of the Congress. When the Principal of the school came to know about her sister's activities, she was called and questioned. Interestingly, this news about the Principal questioning a young girl was reported in local newspapers and created quite a stir. After a few days, the girls of Class VI, of which Subhadra was one of the students, gheraoed their English teacher and raised the slogan: Todi Bacha Hai Hai. That day Subhadra Joshi became a victim of the Principal's wrath and was punished. This news also found coverage in the press with an exaggerated version of the ill-treatment of girls by the Principal. To register their resentment, the Congress Sevika Dal resorted to picketing outside the school's premises. The main picketers were Lado Rani Zutshi and her sister Manmohini Sehgal. To express their solidarity with the Congress Sevika Dal, the girls of the school too expressed their resentment by wearing saffron coloured sarees and slippers.

This incident was a provocation enough which finally led to the expulsion of Subhadra and her sister along with some other girls from the school. Her sister took admission in some other school in Lahore because she had to appear in her matriculation examination. Subhadra Joshi was sent to the Jullunder National School. Being a national school, many revolutionaries like Sushila Mohan, Durga Devi, and so on, used to visit this. Thus the school's atmosphere was conducive to nationalist activities. In the school there was an abundance of revolutionary literature, some of which Subhadra Joshi took home for her brothers. Fearing that her active association with the national movement might lead to her arrest, her father brought her back from Jullunder and got her admitted in the Maharaja Girls School in Jaipur from where she passed her Matriculation. After finishing her studies in Jaipur, her father sent her to Lahore where she completed her studies upto the post-graduate level at Forman Christian College, Lahore. In Lahore, she and her sister stayed in a rented room. In the late 1930s, she actively participated in the Congress meetings, and was an ardent supporter of Khadi and delivered fiery speeches. She was also associated with the students organization which was affiliated to the Communist Movement. Along with her secret involvement with the students organization, she continued to participate in Congress meetings. She completed her M.A. in 1942. She became a lecturer in Queen Mary's College at Lahore. At Lahore, she along with her friend, bought a photostating machine from Khadi Bhandar and learnt cyclostyling. They photostated the underground revolutionary papers and distributed them among various sections of society.

Though most students in Queen Mary's College came from aristocratic families (belonging to princely families), Subhadra Joshi did inspire them and had a lot of influence on them. Drawing inspiration from her talks, the students expressed their desire to do hartal in the college. However, as the principal came to know about it, the matter was pacified. When her activities in Lahore increased manifold, the CID officials told her sister about her and warned that if she continued, she would be caught. After that, she had to come back to Bundi. She came over to Delhi after a brief spell and joined a private school as a teacher. Here in Delhi (1942-47) she actively participated in the freedom movement as well as in the Trade Union activities. She worked with a group of

people whom she came to know through a teacher in the school. They were Brahm Prakash, Mr. B.D. Joshi and Raj Singh Rana. They opened Harijan Schools in various localities for adult education with the aim of spreading the freedom movement. They also brought out an underground newspaper "Hamara Sangram" which was a secret publication ( the paper was started by Brahm Prakash ). Subhadra Joshi used to do the translation work from Hindi to English. She had to leave this private school as her activities became known and joined another missionary school for teaching. She was put in jail while participating in the flag hoisting ceremony. She was also an active worker of the Trade Union Movement. She was active in the Textile Union of Delhi Cloth Mill, which was formed by Mr. B.D. Joshi whom she later on married in 1948. She worked during the riots of 1947 in Delhi when she stayed in a mess together with Brahm Prakash, Raj Singh Rana, B.D. Joshi and T.K. Nayar. At that time, some other active women in Delhi were Choti Devi (Birla Mills worker), Munni Devi and Mrs. Anand. Subhadra Joshi was mainly influenced by Gandhian ideas of truth and non violence. Along with that it was the general atmosphere (anti British and nationalist) of the country as well as her family which influenced her. Her mother too though an uneducated lady never forbade her to join nationalist activity. In fact, every time her father got angry with her (mainly due to the concern for her health), her mother came to her rescue. Her education and life in the hostel led her to be an independent thinking individual who could not just keep herself away from the nationalist fervour. Even after independence she remained in active politics as a congress MP from 1952-77.

### ***Aruna Asaf Ali's Contribution***

Another woman from Delhi who played a significant role in the national movement was Aruna Asaf Ali. Aruna hails from a Brahmo Samaj family of Bengal, After marriage, her parents Mr. and Mrs. Gangulee did not remain for long in Bengal. They spent most of their years at Kalka where Mr. Gangulee was incharge of the Kalka railway refreshment room. Aruna and her younger sister Purnima received their early education at the convent of Sacred Heart at Lahore where their father at that time was working as a journalist. However, Aruna was soon removed from the Catholic

atmosphere when her parents came to know about her impractical ideas (of renouncing the world and becoming a nun) and sent her to a Protestant school at Nainital where Mr. Gangulee by that time opened a hotel. She thus finished her education at Nainital. Her English education had filled her mind with western ideas and after meeting Asaf Ali at her sister's place in Allahabad and after falling in love with him, despite their big age difference (Asaf Ali 41 and Aruna 18) and difference in religion (Asaf Ali being Muslim and Aruna Hindu), she married Asaf Ali. Her parents themselves did not approve of the match. During the wedding ceremony, only two relatives of Aruna and a few common friends were present. This inter provincial and inter communal marriage proved to be a great success. In Aruna's own words "No man could be more generous and liberal than Asaf Ali".<sup>151</sup> After their marriage they shifted to Delhi.

It was with the launching of the Salt Satyagraha that Aruna Asaf Ali started taking a keen interest in politics. The arrest of her husband Asaf Ali proved to be a big motivating factor in her active involvement in politics. She started her political career by delivering a fiery speech about the revolt of 1857. She went about addressing meetings, preparing salt and she also led processions. The Chief Commissioner of Delhi viewed with serious concern her political activities. This led to her prosecution, not on the charges of sedition, "but for being a vagrant having no ostensible means of livelihood".<sup>152</sup>

She was asked to furnish security for good behaviour, which she refused. Aruna was arrested and was sentenced to one year's imprisonment. A few months later most of the political prisoners were released under the Gandhi-Irwin Truce. The government, however, did not think advisable to release Aruna who was in Lahore jail. Her women co-prisoners refused to leave on the ground that unless Aruna was released they would not move. Gandhiji had to intervene and the prisoners left Aruna in jail. Later in response to a strong public agitation, Aruna was released after a few days.<sup>153</sup>

Aruna was arrested again in 1932 and was asked to pay a fine of Rs.200/-. In those days, as has already been pointed out above, political prisoners were treated very badly. As a mark of protest against this, Aruna went on a hunger strike. Though the authorities did concede to the demand of the political prisoners, yet Aruna was made to suffer heavily. She was later transferred to Ambala jail and was kept there in solitary confinement.<sup>154</sup> After the term of her imprisonment was over, she returned to Delhi and for the next ten years, she completely withdrew from politics.

When Aruna, along with Satyawati, was arrested for breaking the Salt Law in a marshy vacant land in Shahadara, Delhi, she found the life in jail a very rewarding experience. This was because she came from a very well-to-do family. She writes :

In prison we led a self-disciplined life, plying the charkha, singing patriotic songs in defiance of the jail rules, conducting literacy classes for non-literate inmates of the jail, and improving our own understanding of politics and economics by reading books (many of them smuggled in, like V.D. Savarkar's). Distinctions of community, caste and sub-caste crumbled in the shared community life of the prison house. No more for us the rituals associated in orthodox homes with cooking and eating. All of us shared the daily chores of scrubbing the floor, cleaning and peeling vegetables, washing utensils and minding the chulah (fireplace). But the cooking was reserved for the experts among us. We fought for and got rations issued instead of cooked food. Pooling our rations helped us to vary the fare of roti (bread), dal (pulses) and vegetables. Visitors from our families, who were allowed once a fortnight, brought welcome additions to our larder in the form of fruits, spicy papad and pickles. Jail, which was intended by the alien rulers to isolate and to demoralise us, turned out to be a university of life where we learnt to rise above our former self-centred existence.<sup>155</sup>

## **The Non-Gandhian Women**

Though most of the women who took part in the national movement were inspired by Gandhi, yet there were a few to whom Gandhi's ideology of non-violence was not acceptable. The revolutionary organizations came into being in 1930s and were particularly active in Bengal, with "Dacca, Comilla and Chittagong being the storm centres. Young college girls joined these secret societies. Kalpana Joshi nee Dutt and Preeti Waddadar were associated with the Chittagong Armoury raid. Preeti led a raid on the Pahartali Railway Officers' Club, as a result of which one European lady was shot. Preeti took potassium cyanide and killed herself. Kalpana, often dressed in male attire, was very active in this area. She was arrested in connection with the Chittagong armoury supplementary trials and was sentenced to transportation for life".<sup>156</sup>

The *modus operandi* of the non-Gandhian women was very much different from that of Gandhian women. Women in the revolutionary mould were full of hatred for the British. They were highly emotional and impulsive and by virtue of their constant association with revolutionaries and their literature, they came to believe that individual acts of heroism – and not building up of a mass movement – were more potent instruments for fighting the British imperialism.

### ***Durgadevi Vohra's Contribution***

Among the non-Gandhian women from Delhi, the name of Durgadevi Vohra, wife of Bhagwati Charan Vohra, stands out prominently. She was part of the Young India Movement of 1930s. Her husband was a close associate of Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev. Durgadevi too worked in association with them and played a very important part in rescuing Bhagat Singh by taking him away from Lahore to Calcutta after Saunder's assassination.

Durgadevi was born in 1907 in a religious Gujarati family settled in Ahmedabad. Her mother died when she was barely ten months old. She was brought up by her

widowed paternal aunt (bua). Since she was married at a tender age of eleven, she did most of her education after marriage. In fact, she appeared in her matriculation after her release from prison. Her father-in-law was conferred with the title of Rai Saheb by the British because of which she and her husband were often suspected by their associates.

Durgadevi was a teacher in the Lahore Girls School and she had started taking part in revolutionary activities at a time when her son was barely three and needed her maximum attention. After her husband's death in a bomb blast in 1929, she got even more actively involved in revolutionary activities. She worked in the defence committee for Bhagat Singh's case. When the police issued warrants against her name after the raiding of the Bomb factory in a house at Lahore, she came to Delhi in a burqa. In Delhi she worked in association with revolutionaries like Dhanvantri,<sup>157</sup> Professor N.K. Nigam,<sup>158</sup> Chandrashekhar Azad<sup>159</sup> and Vaishampayan.<sup>160</sup> In Bombay, she along with Sukhdev<sup>161</sup> and Prithvi Singh<sup>162</sup> shot at two Englishmen at Hamilton Road. She also helped the revolutionaries through delivery of bombs, money and pistols which she carried from one place to another.

In 1932 she was imprisoned for nine months and for three years she was kept confined within the boundaries of Lahore. In 1938 she was elected the President of Delhi Provincial Congress Committee<sup>163</sup> and in 1940 she started the Lucknow Montessori School. Durgadevi's revolutionary ideas were greatly influenced by her leftist husband and Russian literature including the writings of Gorky and Tolstoy.

### ***Roopvati Jain's Contribution***

In Delhi, Roopvati Jain at the age of seventeen was incharge of a bomb factory during the 1930 movement under Chandarshekhar Azad. "This factory at Qutab Road, run in the name of 'Himalayan Toilets' produced picric acid, nitro glycerine, gun-cotton and other ingredients for bombs. Mrs. Jain was an expert in washing picric acid which left yellow, easily detectable stains on the skin".<sup>164</sup>



### ***Sushila Devi's Contribution***

“Sushila Devi, another revolutionary worker, cut her finger and placed mark of blood as tilak on the forehead of the revolutionaries, Bhagat Singh and Batukeshwar Dutt on 9 April 1929. Because of her association with Bhagat Singh to whom she sent letters, rakhi and food, she was arrested and imprisoned. She was declared an absconder in the Delhi and Lahore conspiracy cases and served a number of jail terms”.<sup>165</sup>

### ***Prakashvati Pal's Contribution***

Another revolutionary woman who was actively associated with the national movement was Prakashvati Pal, wife of the noted Hindi writer and freedom fighter, Yashpal. Her memoirs were published in the June 1988 issue of the Ganga magazine. The account given below is based on her memoirs.<sup>166</sup>

Born and brought up in Lahore, she left her home at a very early age. From childhood, she had strong inclination towards revolutionary activities. In school, her teacher Premvati who was associated with Yashpal, Bhagvati Charan Vohra and Durga Devi Vohra encouraged her and other girls to do their best for the revolutionaries. In her memoirs,<sup>167</sup> Prakashvati also mentions her friend Swadesh Kumari, daughter of Lala Pindidas, Rukmani, daughter of Dr. Gopal Chand Bhargava; a Congress leader of Punjab, and Vimla who were working for the revolutionaries. Money was needed in large amount to fight the court cases by revolutionaries. At one place, Prakashvati confesses that many a times she stole gold and money from her own house to give for the cause of the revolutionaries. She even gave away her own gold chain and pendant. As a child, she actively participated in the movement for boycott of foreign goods. Her contacts with Yashpal and other revolutionaries coupled with her strong inclination to work actively in the freedom movement brought her the realization that she could work better if she was not confined to her house. She worked as a volunteer in the Lahore Congress in 1929. In April 1930, the day of her engagement, she left her house. That day her brother had read the letter addressed to her by some revolutionary. In the letter, the

writer had inquired about the date of her joining the party. Her brother read out the letter to her father. After hearing it, her father lost his temper and shouted at her in front of all the guests. In anger he told her to leave the house and go wherever she wanted. Being very independent minded she could not take the insult and immediately took the decision to leave the house. At a time when women were mainly confined to the four walls of their homes (and even if they had stepped out, it was with the consent of the male members of the family), Prakashvati's independent attitude reflects her refusal to be cowed down by prevailing dogmas. After 1930, there was no going back for her; she worked for the revolutionary party in the true spirit of patriotism. She worked just as hard as the men in the party did. She travelled along with the revolutionaries to Delhi, Kanpur, Lucknow and Dehradun. While going through her memoirs one can hardly get the feeling that it is a young girl that we are reading about. It was indeed a remarkable decision by a young girl to leave her home and stay with revolutionaries. In the context of gender relations, it speaks volumes about her independent and courageous outlook. Staying with men and working with them speaks of her liberated mind. There were some more revolutionary women too who were active at that time but their number as compared to men was quite less.

Prakashvati always used to keep a pistol with her.<sup>168</sup> She, along with Vatsyayan<sup>169</sup> and Yashpal made bomb masala in a home in Delhi. Being a true revolutionary, she was often required to shift to other places. At Dehradun, she was known by the name of Shakuntala and worked there in a school as a teacher. It is highly creditable that despite her active involvement with revolutionary activities, she carried on with her studies. She passed Prabhakar examination from Punjab University while she was in Karachi in 1933. The following year she appeared in the high school examination from Banaras and then did a two-year diploma course from Dental College, Karachi. She happened to be the only woman student in the college.

In her memoirs,<sup>170</sup> she has been frank and forthright enough to describe her relationship with Yashpal which culminated in marriage. She candidly admits that it was

love at first sight. Their marriage took place in jail – a very unconventional thing indeed! She also informs that her marriage in jail was the first and the last one. After her marriage, a law was passed according to which marriages in jail were forbidden. When seen in the context of the social structure in India of 1930s, Prakashvati stands apart as a dynamic and liberated woman with radical ideas. And she was not alone in her revolutionary activities. In her memoirs she time and again refers to her women associates such as Durgadevi Vohra, Rukmini, Sushila didi, and so on.

In her memoirs, Prakashvati had also expressed her disagreement with the Gandhian ideology based on the principle of non-violence. Gandhi's criticism of the activities of the revolutionaries and his refusal to protest against the death sentence of Bhagat Singh generated an anti-Gandhi wave among the leftists and Prakashvati Pal was no exception. From her memoirs it becomes clear that the sacrifices made by the revolutionaries carried more weight than the non-cooperation movement of Gandhi in the attainment of the country's independence.

It may thus be seen that the modus operandi of the revolutionary women was much different from that of the Gandhian women. There can be no denying that the number of women nationalists who drew their inspiration from Gandhi was much more than those associated with revolutionary activities. But at the same time, due credit has also to be given to the revolutionary women who made noteworthy contributions to the cause the country's independence.

### ***Conclusion***

By 1934, the Civil Disobedience movement that had started with the Salt Satyagraha came to an end. Indeed this movement was a turning point in the emergence of Indian women from their traditional seclusion. In the past the role of women was confined only to the women from elite classes who were highly educated. But now women from all classes and categories came forward in large numbers from different parts of the country with utmost patriotic zeal and fervour. Women marched in processions; organized picketing of shops selling foreign cloth and liquor; addressed

public meetings; and played a much more dominant role. What is more praiseworthy is that they stuck to their task despite all sorts of atrocities perpetrated against them by the British authorities. The contribution of women was no less than that of men. In a resolution passed by the Indian National Congress on 26-1-1931, it was stated: "We record our homage and deep admiration for the womanhood of India who in the hour of peril for the motherland forsook the shelter of their homes and with unfailing courage and endurance stood shoulder to shoulder with their menfolk in the front line of India's National Army to share with them the sacrifice and triumphs of the struggle".<sup>171</sup>

A significant feature of the Civil Disobedience era was that in various provinces and districts of the country, women became the 'dictators' to run the Congress movement, and the remarkable organizational skills shown by them was a big revelation. All this went a long way in bringing a radical transformation in the self-perception of many women. Besides, it also contributed a great deal to the women's improved status in Indian society. It gave them a new sense of power, self-confidence and a new self-view. To quote Jawaharlal Nehru:

Most of us menfolk were in prison. And then a remarkable thing happened. Our women came to the front and took charge of the struggle. Women had always been there of course, but now there was an avalanche of them, which took not only the British Government but their own menfolk by surprise. Here were these women, women of the upper and middle classes, leading sheltered lives in their homes -- peasant women, working-class women. rich women -- pouring out in their tens of thousands in defiance of government order and police lathi. It was not only that display of courage and daring, but what was even more surprising was the organisational power they showed.<sup>172</sup>

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Born in 1897, educated at Baroda, married Dr. Jivraj Mehta 1924, prominent Woman Leader, participated in Simon Commission demonstration 1928, Civil Disobedience Movement 1930, Bombay Pradesh Congress Committee 1930, Member All India Congress Committee, 1931, imprisoned 1930, 32, elected to Bombay Legislative Council 1931, member Constituent Assembly 1946, founder Vice Chancellor of M.S. University of Baroda 1949-58.
2. It may be noted that the motivating factor in the assassination of Saunders in December 1928 was Lajpat Rai's death.
3. Manmohan Kaur, *Women in India's Freedom Struggle* (Sterling, Delhi, 1985), p. 151.
4. Born in 1904 near Bombay, Manben Patel was the daughter of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. She received her early education at Queen Mary's High School and St. Joseph's Convent at Bombay. She later studied at Gujarat Vidyapith, Ahmedabad.
5. Shirin Mehta, "The Role of Women in the Peasant Movement of Gujarat: A Study in Gandhian Phase", in N. Prasad, ed. *Problems and Issues in Gandhism* (Inter-India, Delhi, 1990), p. 67.
6. Cited in Manmohan Kaur, *op.cit.*, p. 152.
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8. Gandhi to C.F. Andrews, 24 August 1928, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (hereinafter CWMG), Vol. 37, p. 200.

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10. S. Gopal, ed, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, Vol. 4, p. 198.
11. S. Gopal, *The Viceroyalty of Lord Irwin, 1926-1931* (Oxford, 1957), p. 55.
12. Cited in Rajan Mahan, *op.cit.*, p. 266.
13. Dennis Dalton, "The Dandi March", in B.R. Nanda, ed, *Essays in Modern Indian History* (OUP, Delhi, 1980), p. 90.
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15. Aruna Asaf Ali, *The Resurgence of Indian Women* (Radiant Publishers, Delhi, 1991), p. 100.
16. Transcript of Interview with Durgabai Deshmukh, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, p. 32.
17. Usha Bhat, "Role of Women in the Freedom Struggle in Ahmedabad", unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Gujarat University. Cited in Aparna Basu, "The Role of Women in the Indian Struggle for Freedom", in B.R. Nanda, ed, *Indian Women: From Purdah to Modernity* (Vikas, Delhi, 1976), p. 23.
18. See Aparna Basu, *op.cit.*, p. 23.
19. D.G. Tendulkar, *Life of Mahatma Gandhi* (K. Jhaveri and D.G. Tendulkar, Bombay, 1940), Vol. II, p. 20.
20. Vijay Agnew, *Elite Women in Indian Politics* (Delhi. 1979). p. 39.
21. CWMG, Vol. 43, p. 12. Also see Rajan Mahan. *op.cit.* p. 268.
22. See *Young India*, 10 April 1930.
23. *Ibid.*

24. Aparna Basu, *op.cit.*, p. 24.
25. Rajan Mahan, *op.cit.*, pp.270-71. Also see *Young India*, 17 April 1930.
26. K. Chattopadhyaya, *Indian Women's Battle for Freedom* (Abhinav, Delhi, 1983), pp. 106-107.
27. Rajan Mahan, *op.cit.*, p. 273.
28. Dharasana Salt Works are situated at a distance of 150 miles north of Bombay.
29. *The Times of India*, 8 May 1930. Cited in Manmohan Kaur, *op.cit.*, p.165.
30. *The Times of India*, 15 May, 1930.
31. Quoted in Jack A. Homer, *The Gandhian Reader* (Bloomington, 1956), p.252.  
Also cited in Manmohan Kaur, *op.cit.*, p. 165
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*
34. Cited in Rajan Mahan, *op.cit.*, p. 274.
35. Webb Miller, *I Found No Peace* (Simon and S. Chuster, New York, 1936), pp. 190-96.
36. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 22 May, 1930.
37. See Naidu's Statement in P. Sengupa, *Sarojini Naidu : A Biography* (Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1966), p. 234.
38. Aparna Basu, *Mridula Sarabhai : Rebel with a Cause* (OUP, Delhi, 1996), p. 34.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
41. *The Tribune*, 9 April 1930 and 13 April 1930.
42. *The Tribune*, 15 April 1930.

43. Mahadev Desai, *Diaries* (Ahmedabad, 1954), Vol. 13, p. 303.
44. See Aparna Basu, Mridula Sarabhai, *op.cit.*, 1996, p. 37.
45. Cited in Aparna Basu, "The Role of Women", *op.cit.*, 1976, p. 27.
46. The young girl was Lilavati while Gangabehn Vaidya was a widow, an inmate of the Sabarmati Ashram. The latter received head injuries during the incident. See "Letter to Viceroy", 1 February 1931 in CWMG, Vol. 35, p. 137.
47. Rajan Mahan, *op.cit.*, p. 275.
48. CWMG, Vol. 45, p. 152. See also "Speech at Meeting of Women's Indian Council" in London on 18-11-1931. CWMG, Vol. 48, p.312.
49. See Aruna Asaf Ali, *op.cit.*, p. 101.
50. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, "The Struggle for Freedom", in Tara Ali Baig, ed. *Women of India* (Publications Division, Delhi. 1958), p. 21.
51. Aruna Asaf Ali, *op.cit.*, pp.101-02.
52. Hansa Mehta was an educationist and social reformer who was married to Dr Jinraj Mehta, outside her brahmin caste. She was the first woman to be elected to the Bombay Legislative Council in 1931.
53. Perin Captain was the grand-daughter of Dadabhai Naoroji. She and her sister Goshibehn were close friends of Kamla Nehru.
54. Lilavati Munshi, like her husband K.M. Munshi. was a leading writer in Gujarati. Both played an important role in the national movement. They were also known for their social reform activities.
55. Aruna Asaf Ali, *op.cit.*, p. 102.
56. *Ibid.*



57. Ibid.
58. Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography*, p. 344.
59. Horace Alexander, *Gandhi Through Western Eyes* (Bombay, 1969), p. 64.
60. Geraldine Forbes, *The New Cambridge History of India*, IV.2, *Women in Modern India* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 135.
61. Leela Kasturi and Vina Mazundar, ed, *Women and Indian Nationalism* (Vikas, Delhi, 1994), P. 117.
62. N. Seeta Devi, *Life History of Durgabai Deshmukh* (Madras, 1977), pp. 16-18.
63. Transcript of interview with Smt. Durgabai Deshmukh, NMML, New Delhi.
64. *The Indian Annual Register*, Vol. I, January-June 1930, p.119.
65. *Prajatantra*, 28 April 1930. Also see Bina Kumari Sarma, "Gandhian Movement and Women's Awakening in Orissa", *The Indian Historical Review*, Vol. XXI. Nos 1 & 2, edited by Anup Taneja (ICHR and Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1997), p. 85.
66. Home Political Proceedings (hereinafter Home Pol.), File No. 5/62/1932.
67. *Samaj*, 23 April 1930.
68. *Young India*, 8 May 1930.
69. Home Pol., File No. 251/1/1930.
70. See K.M. Patra, *Orissa Legislative and Freedom Struggle* ( ICHR, Delhi, 1979). p. 75.
71. H.K. Mahatab, ed, *History of the Freedom Movement in Orissa* (Cuttack, 1957). Vol. V, p. 4.
72. See Bina Kumari Sarma, *op.cit.*, p. 86.

73. Savitri Raut, *Pioneer Women in Oriya Literature* (Delhi, 1971), p. 51.
74. Chandradhar Mohapatra, *Kuntala Kumari Sabat* (in Oriya), pp. 123-29. Also see Bina Kumari Sarma, *op.cit.*, p. 87.
75. A.R. Desai, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism* (Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1948), pp.278-79.
76. See Bina Kumari Sarma, *op.cit.*
77. Home Pol., File No.5/62/1932.
78. Bina Kumari Sarma, *op.cit.*
79. Home Pol., *op.cit.*
80. *Young India*, 10 April 1930.
81. *Ibid.*
82. *Young India*, 8 May 1930.
83. Home Pol., File No. 18/January 1931.
84. Home Pol., File No.5/62/1932.
85. See Bina Kumari Sarma, *op.cit.*, p.88.
86. Home Pol., *op.cit.*
87. *Ibid.*
88. Home Pol., File No. 18/VII/1930.
89. *Young India*, 20 April 1930; CWMG, Vol. XLIII. p.220.
90. *Orissa Review* (January 1987), p. 3.
91. See Bina Kumari Sarma, *op.cit.*
92. *Annual Report of Police Administration* (Bombay, 1932), p. XI.
93. Geraldine Forbes, *op.cit.*, p. 137.

94. Ibid.
95. Ibid., p. 139.
96. Ibid., p. 140.
97. Rajan Mahan, op.cit., p.286.
98. Young India, 10 April. 1930.
99. Ibid.
100. See Leela Kasturi and Vina Mazumdar, op.cit., pp.164-65.
101. Ibid., p. 165.
102. Ibid.
103. K.K. Datta, History of the Freedom Movement in Bihar (Patna, 1957), Vol. II, pp.114-16.
104. See Leela Kasturi and Vina Mazumdar, op.cit., p. 165.
105. See K.K. Datta, op.cit., p.107.
106. The Hindustan Times, 14 September 1930.
107. The Hindustan Times, 6 October 1930.
108. Delhi Satyagraha Report, 1930.
109. Wife of Shri J.M. Sen Gupta. She was convicted in a case in Delhi and lodged in Delhi Jail.
110. Delhi Satyagraha Report, 1930.
111. Born, 1904, resident of Delhi, wife of Dr. Yudhvair Singh. took part in Civil Disobedience Movement (1930) and Quit India Movement (1942), sentenced in 1930 to 6 months imprisonment for picketing wine shops. during Quit India Movement, her residence was the centre for the distribution of national literature,

arrested along with Raghubir Singh Panch Hazari, sentenced on 20 March 1944 to three months imprisonment in Central Jail, Delhi; her husband Yudhvir Singh, one of the Congress leaders of Delhi was also arrested and convicted a number of times. She helped him in organizing Congress and charkha spinning.

112. Delhi Pradesh Congress Committee Report, 1931.
113. The Hindustan Times, 11 and 12 October, 1930.
114. Basu Jugal Kishore Khanna, the founder of the I.P. School and College, was a nationalist to the core.
115. Home Pol., File No. 14/4/1932.
116. Ibid.
117. Ibid.
118. Ibid.
119. The Congress Bulletin (Delhi, June 1930), No. 23 in All India Congress Committee File (1930) : 26 June 1930.
120. Ibid., 24 May 1930.
121. Home Pol., file No. 18/VIII/July 1930.
122. Born in 1890, resident of Delhi, wife of Shri Sahib Das Suri, one of the leading organizer of Delhi Women, took part in Civil Disobedience Movement (1932-34) and Quit India Movement (1942), sentenced on 10 February 1932, nine months Rigorous Imprisonment (R.I.) and on 20 October, 1942 to four months R.I. in Central Jail, Delhi; transferred to Female Jail, Lahore on 26 October 1942; her son Shri Krishna Suri and her daughter Satya were also arrested.

123. Born in 1901, resident of Delhi, wife of Shri Chaturbhuj Didwania, social reformer, one of the prominent Congress members among Delhi Congress Mahila Sangh; specially worked in foreign cloth picketing and Bal Sena; she also worked in Rajasthan along with Seth Jamnalal Bajaj; took part in Civil Disobedience Movement (1930) and Quit India Movement (1942); sentenced in 1930 to six months imprisonment, again arrested on 10 August 1942 and detained to two years under the Defence of India rules.
124. Young India, 10 April 1930.
125. Aruna Asaf Ali, op.cit., 1991, pp. 104-105.
126. Upto 1930, women were assigned these tasks which they could do at home, such as practising swadeshi and spinning. Now, they were demanding a more active role. See Neera Ahuja, "Gandhi's Ideas on Women Development: A Critical Analysis". Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Delhi, 1996, pp.61-63, MSS Central Reference Library, University of Delhi.
127. Aruna Asaf Ali, DPCC (File), 1985, DSA (Souvenir Record).
128. Oral Transcripts : Phool Chand Jain. Brij Kishan Chandiwal and Memo Bai, NMML, New Delhi.
129. Aruna Asaf Ali, DPCC (File), 1985, DSA (Souvenir Record).
130. Aruna Asaf Ali, op.cit., 1991, p.105.
131. AICC File No. G-1/1931, NMML, New Delhi. Also see The Hindustan Times, 11 April 1930.
132. Ibid. Also see AICC File No. G-94/Pt.-1, 1930. NMML, Congres Bulletin, 3-6-1930. It was reported that most of the shopkeepers in Chandni Chowk were

willing to close down their shops and lock their foreign cloth under the seal of the Congress.

133. Communique issued by District Congress Committee, Delhi, AICC File No.18-21 of 1931, NMML. See also Home Pol. File No. 256/11/1930 & KW. Civil Disobedience Movement in Delhi, for a copy of Report of the Bar Association Sub-Committee, appointed to inquire into the incidents of 6<sup>th</sup> May 1930, which blamed the police for unprovoked firing on ladies procession.
134. A.F. Brockway, Indian Crisis (London), p. 260.
135. Amrita Bazar Patrika, 27 May 1930.
136. Congress Bulletin, 28 May 1930, in All India Congress Committee Reports (1930).
137. AICC, File No. G-1/1931, NMML. See also Brij Kishan Chandiwalla Private Papers, NMML. See Campell in HCE Zakaria, Renascent India from Ram Mohan Roy to Mohan Das Gandhi (London, 1930).
138. Brij Kishan Chandiwalla, 75<sup>th</sup> Birth Anniversary article on Satyawati. Private Papers of Chandiwalla, MSS Section, NMML, New Delhi.
139. History Sheet of Satyawati, op.cit. A CID report states, "Satyawati of Delhi is equally interested in the activities of revolutionaries and she has promised to help such young men. She wishes to publish a series of leaflets against the capitalists". Delhi Police CID (Special Branch), File No. 59/1934-39, III Inst. NMML.
140. A CID source AZIZ, dated 11-7-34, states that nearly all women interested in the Congress are in the socialist group, File No.11/1934, Delhi Police CID.
141. Oral History Transcript, NMML, New Delhi.

142. Cited in Aruna Asaf Ali, *op.cit.*, 1991, p.106.
143. File No.10/2-44 SB, dt. 14 January 1945, National Archives of India.
144. Congress Bulletin, 24 May 1930, All India Congress Committee Reports (1930).
145. The Hindustan Times, 13 September 1930.
146. The Hindustan Times, 15 and 16 October 1930.
147. Interview Recorded by Dr Hari Dev Sharma in Oral History Section, NMML; interview recorded on 30-1-1970.
148. Ibid.
149. Ibid., p. 16.
150. The information provided here about Subhadra Joshi is based on interview conducted by Ruchi Seth. See *idem*, "Women's Response to the Freedom Movement: A Case Study of Delhi", Unpublished Dissertation, Master of Philosophy, University of Delhi, 1991.
151. Fragments from the Past – Selected Writings and Speeches of Aruna Asaf Ali (Delhi, 1989), Introduction, p. 3.
152. Cited in Manmohan Kaur, *op.cit.*, p. 219. Also see The Tribune, 18 February 1946.
153. Manmohan Kaur, *op.cit.*, p. 219.
154. The Tribune, 18 February, 1946.
155. Aruna Asaf Ali, *op.cit.*, 1991, p. 105.
156. Aparna Basu, "The Role of Women", *op.cit.*, 1976, p.31.

157. Born in 1902, resident of Delhi, son of Shri Durga Dutt; participated in the freedom struggle; one of the accused in Delhi Conspiracy Case; sentenced to seven years R.I. in 1933 in Delhi, later transferred to Port Blair Jail (Andaman).
158. Born in 1906, lecturer with an M.A. degree took active part in revolutionary movement (1929-35) and Quit India Movement (1942).
159. Joined the secret organization of North India – the Hindustan Republican Association, involved in Kakori Conspiracy Case (1925) in Sept. 1928, became the top leader of Hindustan Socialist Republican Army and the Commander of the Military Division. Associated with the attempt to blow up the Viceroy's train, the Assembly Bomb Incident, the Delhi Conspiracy Case, the shooting of Saunders at Lahore and the Second Lahore Conspiracy.
160. A close associate of Bhagwati Charan Vohra; actively participated in the freedom movement.
161. Born at Lyallpur in Punjab. A close associate of Chandrashekhar Azad and Bhagat Singh, took a leading part in the reorganization of the revolutionary party into Hindustan Socialist Republication Army in September 1928 and looked after its activities in Punjab and U.P.; planned the shooting of Saunders in December 1928 and the Bomb Outrage in the Central Legislative Assembly in April 1929; tried as a principal accused in the Lahore Conspiracy Case, he received death punishment along with Bhagat Singh and Rajguru.
162. Participated in the freedom struggle, took part in Civil Disobedience movement in Delhi.
163. The Hindustan Times, 15 August, 1972.



164. Aparna Basu, *op.cit.*, 1976, p. 33.
165. *Ibid.*
166. See June 1988 issue of Ganga Magazine. The details given here are based on Ruchi Seth, *op.cit.*
167. *Ibid.*
168. *Ibid.*
169. He was a close associate of Yashpal.
170. See Ruchi Seth, *op.cit.*
171. Cited in Aloo J. Dastur and Usha H. Mehta, *Gandhi's Contribution to the Emancipation of Women* (Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1991). p. 48.
172. Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (London, 1960), pp. 27-28.

## CHAPTER-VII

### WOMEN AND THE CONGRESS MOVEMENTS, 1935-47

#### I

##### The 1937 Elections

The passing of the Govt. of India Act of 1935 was a big occasion for the Indian women because it paved the way for them to be elected to the State legislatures and also to become administrators. It also gave voting rights to women above 21 years of age “who qualified because they owned property or had attained a certain level of education”.<sup>1</sup>

However, it was only after a long deliberation over a period of time that the Act of 1935 was promulgated. In the first entry of his Indian Diary, Edwin Montagu recorded: “I received a letter from Jaipur in the vernacular and the request for an interview from the women of India”.<sup>2</sup> This was in fact a reference to a letter signed by four members of the Senate of the Indian Women’s University. A deputation of fourteen women led by Sarojini Naidu had demanded in December 1917 that as far as franchise was concerned women should be treated on a par with men. Women’s Indian Association held a number of meetings in support of franchise for women. Women of the educated classes had sent a number of petitions to the Franchise Committee (of which Lord Southborough was the President), demanding that women be granted the right to vote on the same property qualifications as for men, or to at least women graduates. <sup>3</sup> Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu, Herabai Tata and Milthan

Tata also supported this issue. At a special session of the Congress held in August 1918, Sarojini Naidu spoke on behalf of women's suffrage. During the course of her speech, she tried to impress upon the audience that there was an urgent need to extend the franchise to women that was "rational, scientifically and politically sound, compatible with tradition, and consistent with human rights".<sup>4</sup> She also tried to convince her audience that politics did not affect women's femininity adversely as was generally believed. To quote her:

Never, never, for we realize that men and women have their separate goals, separate destinies and that just as man can never fulfill the responsibility of the destiny of a woman, a woman cannot fulfill the responsibility of man... We ask for the vote, not that we might interfere with you in your official functions, your civic duties, your public place and power, but rather that we might lay the foundation of national character in the souls of the children that we hold upon our laps, and instill into them the ideals of national life.<sup>5</sup>

In 1918, the Indian National Congress also passed a unanimous resolution, supporting the voting rights of women.

During the course of the Franchise Committee's visit to Bombay, Indian women placed before it a petition signed by as many as 800 women. Similar requests were also made by the Women Graduates; University of Bombay, the branches of the Indian

Women's Association, the women's branch of the Home Rule League and other women's associations.<sup>6</sup>

The Southborough Committee, however, expressed the opinion that the prevalent social conditions of India were such that the extension of freedom to women was not considered appropriate.<sup>7</sup> However, the Govt. of India Act of 1919 provided that the provinces should decide the issue of franchise for women. Thus, one after another, the provincial legislators began enfranchising women on the same terms as men. The first province to take the initiative was Madras, which also had the "distinction of having the first Indian woman legislator, namely, Dr. S. Muthulakshmi Reddy, who was chosen Dy. Speaker of the Madras Legislative Council". Though a nominated member, she resigned her seat in protest against Gandhi's arrest in 1930. The first woman to have taken the bold step of risking election was Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay. She stood as an independent candidate from South Kanara in 1926. Even though Margaret Cousins was actively involved in her election campaign, yet she got defeated by a margin of 515 votes.<sup>8</sup> As far as election to the provincial legislatures was concerned, by 1926 the women began to be treated on the equal footing with men in all the provinces. The Govt. of India Act of 1935 enabled six million Indian women to exercise their franchise, a remarkable improvement in the figure of 315000 under the Act of 1919. <sup>9</sup> It would, however, be significant to note that though the number of women voters increased considerably, yet only two and a half per cent of adult women had received the right to vote.<sup>10</sup>

Above all, the Congress did not seem particularly inclined to support aspiring women politicians as candidates. After the passing of the Act of 1935, the Congress, which had

earlier focussed entirely on its anti-imperialist fight, began emerging as a political party showing preference for propertied men. Sumit Sarkar makes the following observation:

“Despite its national multi-class ideals, the Congress as a ruling party found it almost impossible to go on pleasing Hindus and Muslims, landlords and peasants, or businessmen and workers at the same time. A steady shift to the Right, occasionally veiled by ‘Left’ rhetoric increasingly characterized the functioning of the 11<sup>1</sup>.

Nehru and Gandhi too who were ardent votaries of the women’s cause did not seem to favour the idea of women’s involvement in politics and the “promises of civil disobedience campaign had been set aside in favour of *realpolitik*”. 12 The Congress did, however, support the view that women should be considered for reserved seats. But Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy did not favour the idea of separate seats for women.13 At the same time the majority of women interested in politics preferred uncontested seats; the idea of political campaign was not palatable to them.

Radhabai Subbarayan, one of the rare cases where a woman came forward to fight for a general seat in Madras, was betrayed by the Congress. To start with, the Chairman of the Madras Provincial Congress Reception Committee decided to support her, but when a man expressed his desire to fight for the same seat, the Congress backed out from its earlier decision of supporting Subbarayan. When Subbarayan questioned C. Rajagopalachari about this, he replied that her refusal to sign the Congress pledge was

not appreciated by the Congress, and hence the betrayal. Rajagopalachari told her that the Congress could not make the seat available “merely because it was a woman candidate that was seeking to be elected.... I do not believe that (the) advanced type of women politicians want political favours because they are women”.<sup>14</sup> This incident:

Demonstrates the insincerity of much of Congress sympathy with the aspirations of women, and proves that the Congress party is no better than others in its treatment of women candidates. Women are useful to head disobedience processions but scarcely good enough to sit with the Party in the Assembly.<sup>15</sup>

Women, however, had something to cheer about when the results of 1937 elections were declared. Eight women were elected from general constituencies and forty-two from the reserved constituencies. Six women became ministers when the provincial cabinets were formed. Vijayalakshmi Pandit became Minister for Local Self-Government and Public Health in UP; and later Anasuyabai Kale of Central Provinces, and Sippi Milani of Sind were appointed Dy. Speakers in Madhya Pradesh and Sind respectively. Hansa Mehta and Begum Shah Nawaz took office as Parliamentary Secretaries in Bombay and Punjab respectively. Three women – Mrs. Subbarayan, Begum Shah Nawaz and Sarojini Naidu—attended the Round Table Conference during 1931-32. This victory greatly encouraged the women’s organizations and they recommended the nomination of women to commissions, boards and councils. They believed that women were better placed to understand the problems faced by women and children.<sup>16</sup>

But despite some success registered by women in the political field, election politics had remained male-dominated. Women had hopes that they would be rewarded for the support extended by them to the Congress both in the Non-cooperation Movement of 1920-21 and the Civil Disobedience movement of 1930-32. This, however, did not happen.

## II

### INDIVIDUAL SATYAGRAHA

The year 1939 saw the beginning of the Second World War in Europe. On 3 September, 1939 England declared war on German Reich, “professedly in defence of democracy and the weak nations”.<sup>17</sup> Ironically though Britain was against the idea of granting freedom to India which was her dependency. Lord Linlithgow, the then Governor-General of India, without consulting the leaders of the Congress and members of the Indian Legislative Assembly or the Provincial Governments declared India to be at war the same day, that is, 3 September, 1939.

Gandhi and Nehru, Together with other like-minded leaders, strongly felt that India should not participate in the war. In fact way back in 1936, the Indian National Congress had made it clear in its election manifesto about its “opposition to the participation of India in an independent war”.<sup>18</sup> The Working Committee of the Indian

National Congress which met in September 1939 had also made its stand absolutely clear. The Working Committee observed that the “declared wishes of the Indian people ... have been deliberately ignored by the British Government”, and while the committee “unhesitatingly condemns the latest aggression of the Nazi Government in Germany against Poland... the issue of war and peace for India must be decided by the Indian people”.<sup>19</sup>

However, India was ready to consider giving help to the British Government in the war period provided it made a firm commitment that independence would be granted to India. The British Govt., on the other hand was not prepared to concede to this. This was what provoked Gandhi to launch his Individual Satyagraha campaign and to openly pursue the anti-war propaganda. The Congress decided to “Carry on non-violently and openly anti-war propaganda” and “to preach non-cooperation with the Government in their war efforts”.<sup>20</sup>

This campaign was opened by Vinoba Bhave on 17 October 1940, which was sanctioned by Gandhi.

Individual Satyagrahis, in the beginning people personally chosen by him, made public anti-war speeches in defiance of emergency orders. One by one Congress leaders declared themselves opposed to the government, were arrested and imprisoned. Altogether four hundred Congress men and women were jailed in



1940. By June 1941 almost 20,000 had gone to jail but the movement declined after that.<sup>21</sup>

The campaign continued till the end of the year when the Govt. felt constrained to release the political prisoners in view of the disturbed political situation of the country.

Women in different parts of the country took part in the Individual Satyagraha campaign. In Orissa, the Provincial Satyagraha Committee nominated 48 people for taking part in this campaign in the first batch.<sup>22</sup> This list was then sent to Gandhi, who selected 27 names for the campaign in Orissa, which was inaugurated by H.K. Mahatab on 1 December 1940. He delivered a fiery speech in a meeting near Balasore and was arrested.<sup>23</sup> Smt. Sarala Devi was the first woman who took part in the Individual Satyagraha in Orissa in the first batch along with H.K. Mahatab.<sup>24</sup>

In Cuttack also Individual Satyagraha started with full vigour in different places. Gandhi gave permission to Smt. Priyambada Devi<sup>25</sup> to start Satyagraha at Cuttack. Malati Choudhary also sought permission from Gandhi to participate in the Satyagraha, but he declined – the reason being that at that time her daughter was only one year old.<sup>26</sup>

In the Ganjam district of Orissa, Satyagraha started at different places. On 4 December 1940, Smt. A Lakshmibai expressed desire to take part in the campaign at the Congress Committee office verandah and delivered an anti-war speech in a grand meeting held at Berhampur. The police, however, immediately took her into custody.<sup>27</sup>

In Rasalkonda (Bhanjanagar), Smt. Champa Devi carried out her Individual Satyagraha campaign right in front of the police station, and was imprisoned.<sup>28</sup> Also, Smt. Taramani Acharya,<sup>29</sup> an extremist leader, took part in the Individual Satyagraha campaign at Anarkali Bazar in Lahore on 18 August 1941. She was kept in the prison for seven months at Lahore Jail.<sup>30</sup>

The women of Bihar also did not lag behind. Those who took an active part in the Individual Satyagraha campaign in Bihar included Priyamvada Devi, Janki Devi and Jagatrani Devi. They were arrested in Gaya and sentenced to an imprisonment of four months in addition of a fine of Rs.200/- each.<sup>31</sup> However, some women who took part in the Individual Satyagraha in Santhal Parganas were not arrested.<sup>32</sup> An announcement was made that a public meeting would be held (in Dhumka in Santhal Parganas) in February 1941 in which Mrs. Mahadevi Kejariwal – the wife of the President of Santhal Parganas Congress Committee - would take part in the Individual Satyagraha campaign. Mrs. Kejariwal met the Dy. Commissioner at his residence on 26 February in order to give him prior information about her plans. The written notice which she gave him contained the following message: “This is not a war of India, therefore it is a sin to give support to the British either through money or through individuals. We should oppose the armed battle through Satyagraha”.<sup>33</sup> As per the plans, Mrs. Kejariwal did offer Satyagraha after giving the notice, but the Dy. Commissioner did not pass orders for her arrest.<sup>34</sup>

In the East Godavari District of Andhra Pradesh, “the only woman who took part in the campaign was Vedantam Kamala Devi”.<sup>35</sup>

Other eminent Congress women who took part in Individual Satyagraha were: Vijaylakshmi Pandit, Sarojini Naidu and Sucheta Kripalani. Vijaylakshmi Pandit was Jailed for four months. 36 Sarojini Naidu was arrested on 3 December 1940, but she fell ill and had to be released shortly -- on 11 December 1940. Sucheta Kripalani who had been incharge of the Women's Department of the A.I.C.C. since 1939, also courted arrest.

Among the women of Delhi, Satyawati, along with Ved Kumari, Hans Kaur and Siddheshwari Devi 37 took part in the Individual Satyagraha. Satyawati was Jailed for one year and released in 1941. Aruna Asaf Ali too, along with her husband, was chosen by Gandhi to participate in Individual Satyagraha. To quote Aruna:

On the viceroy rejecting the Congress offer, renewed in July 1940, to support the war effort if a provisional national government was formed with the promise of independence at the end of the hostilities, the Congress launched a Satyagraha campaign. But it was confined to token civil disobedience... in order not to embarrass the British during 'the perils and dangers of war'. Imprisonment was courted by individuals chosen by Gandhiji. Jawaharlal was arrested in October 1940; my husband and I were soon added to the honours list.<sup>38</sup>

According to Gandhi, "The Congress never organized a movement more glorious... than the Individual Satyagraha campaign from October 1940 to December

1941, for no Civil Disobedience Movement was more civil, more distinguished by dissociation from indiscipline and violence than this campaign”.<sup>39</sup> However, Congress leaders were not happy with the Individual Satyagraha campaign. In the words of Sumit Sarkar this campaign was “among the weakest and least effective of all the Gandhian national campaigns”.<sup>40</sup>

### III

#### Quit India Movement

The visit of Sir S. Cripps to India, instead of creating goodwill and an amicable solution, left feelings of ill-will and bitterness among the Indian people. The failure of the Cripps Mission and the reverses suffered by the British forces to the World War made Gandhi very apprehensive. He feared that India might go the way of Malaya and Burma if the British did not quit. In an interview to an American journal, Gandhi made the following observations:

Hundreds, if not thousands, on their way from Burma perished without food and drink, and the wretched discrimination stared even these miserable people in the face. One route for the whites, another for the blacks! And discrimination even on their arrival in India! India is being ground down to dust and humiliated... And so one fine morning I came to the decision to make this honest demand: “For Heaven’s sake leave India alone. Let us breathe the air of freedom. It may choke us, suffocate us, as it did the slaves on their emancipation. But I want the present sham to end.”<sup>41</sup>

In its meeting held at Wardha on 14 July 1942, the Congress Working Committee passed a resolution, calling for the immediate withdrawal of British rule from India. The All India Congress Committee which met at Bombay on 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> August 1942, reiterated this decision. The operative portion of the resolution said:

The Committee resolves, therefore, to sanction for the vindication of India's inalienable right to freedom and independence, the starting of a mass struggle on non-violent lines on the widest possible scale... such a struggle must inevitably be under the leadership of Gandhiji and the Committee requests him to take the lead and guide the nation in the steps to be taken.

The Committee appeals to the people of India to ....carry out his instructions as disciplined soldiers of Indian freedom.... A time may come when it may not be possible to issue instructions or for instructions to reach our people, and when no Congress Committee can function. When this happens, every man and woman, who is participating in this movement must function of himself or herself within the four corners of the general instructions issued. Every Indian who desires freedom and strives for it must be his own guide urging him on along the hard road where there is no resting place and which leads ultimately to the independence and deliverance of India.<sup>42</sup>

On 8 August, Gandhi concluded his speech with the following remarks: "The Congress will do or die .... I shall make every effort to see the Viceroy or address a letter to him and wait for his reply before starting the struggle. It may take a week or a

fortnight or three weeks". Maulana Azad, the Congress President, announced that the copies of the resolution would be sent to President Roosevelt, to the Chinese Govt. and to the Soviet Ambassador in London. Gandhi wrote later: "The movement was not started by the resolution of 8 August. Before I could function, they arrested not only me, who was to lead and guide the movement if negotiations failed, but principal Congressmen all over India. Thus it was not I but the government who started the movement". 43

Gandhi was arrested on 9 August 1942. Aruna Asaf Ali informs that Gandhi and his colleagues had no inkling whatsoever that they would be taken into police custody within a few hours. "Some of us, however, knew that the arrests were coming. My husband and I had told the leaders about the Government's plan before the A.I.C.C. meeting began, but they would not believe".44

Gandhi's message "Do or Die" became a motto for the millions, which brought about mass awakening among the Indians. Even the government employees started supporting those who were fighting for the country's freedom.

Jugal Kishore Khanna, the then General Secretary of the Delhi Pradesh Congress Committee, informs that he had come to know through a friend in the Home Department about the Top-Secret circular to the Bombay Govt., the Railways and other concerned authorities about plans of the arrest of Gandhi and other Congress leaders immediately after the adoption of the Quit India resolution.

“I sent the information through Asaf Ali to Bombay. He left on 3 August 1942 in the morning by the Frontier Mail and gave the information to the Working Committee at its first meeting. But, as I was told later on in Bombay on the 6<sup>th</sup> or the 7<sup>th</sup>, Sarojini Naidu and others laughed it away saying: ‘These Delhi people always bring all sorts of news’. On the 7<sup>th</sup>, the information was confirmed by a Bombay Secretariat source. On the 8<sup>th</sup>, the proceedings (of the AICC) went on till 10.30 p.m. Mahatma Gandhi for the first time made a very long speech, for about one-and-a-half hours instead of the usual 15 or 20 minutes, on ‘Do or Die’, the final struggle. Maulana Azad asked us to meet him at Birla House (where he was staying) at 7.30 the next morning for proceeding to the flag-hoisting ceremony at Gowalia Tank Maidan. I laughed at the idea.<sup>45</sup>

When informed about the secret plans about the impending arrests, Sarojini Naidu “called it the wild talk of opium workers at a Chandukhana in Delhi”.<sup>46</sup> However, Asaf Ali was arrested early next morning. His wife Aruna wrote:

My husband and I were not in the least surprised when, in the early hours of 9 August, the police knocked on the door at the flat where we were staying. When they announced Asaf Saheb’s arrest, I asked ‘What about me?’ ‘There is no warrant for you, madam’, I was told.<sup>47</sup>

The news of Gandhi’s arrest on 9 August 1942 lead to hartals in Bombay, Ahmedabad and Poona. By 11 August the movement assumed threatening proportions,

with people taking out processions, holding meetings and demonstrations. Industrial labour went on a strike in Ahmedabad, Bombay, Kanpur, Indore, Bangalore and Mysore. 48

The movement soon spread to other places as well “where peasants rebelled against landowners and the agents of British authority”<sup>49</sup> At several places people declared independence and took charge of the police stations. Flags were hoisted on Secretariat buildings, courts and other Govt. offices. The Govt. machinery was in complete shambles in several districts in Bihar, Central Provinces, Andhra, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka, Assam, Orissa and parts of Bengal. In order to bring the situation under control the Govt. enacted “The Penalties Enhancement Ordinance, Collective Fine Ordinance, the Special Court Ordinance, the Whipping Ordinance”.<sup>50</sup>

Women too played a prominent part of the Quit India movement in different parts of the country, particularly in the absence of male leaders who were arrested in the first round. Apart from taking out processions and holding demonstrations, women also organized training camps in which “they were given training in civic duties, and first aid, educated on democracy and Indian Constitution. Training in lathi and drill was also imparted in the camps”.<sup>51</sup> The women also organized Political Prisoner’s Relief Fund and collected a large amount of money. Some women went underground and directed the movement from there.

### **Aruna Asaf Ali’s Contribution**



Aruna Asaf Ali played a significant role in the Quit India movement. She remained underground for four years, evading arrest. She brought out a number of bulletins and edited in collaboration with Ram Manohar Lohia, the Inquilab. The British authorities had announced a reward of Rs.5,000/- to anyone who could tell about her whereabouts. Indeed “the heroine of 1857 was the Rani of Jhansi, that of the 1942 revolution was undoubtedly Aruna Asaf Ali”.<sup>52</sup>

Aruna Asaf Ali was of the opinion that the reign of Akbar and the Mughal period should be our guide, and not Ram Raj. Though she was an ardent Gandhian to start with, but her ideological beliefs underwent a change when she came into contact with the likes of Jayaprakash Narain, Achyut Patwardhan and Ram Manohar Lohia. Her inclination to follow the path of Socialism becomes evident from the following statement of hers : “Towards Socialism, I shall march”.<sup>53</sup> In 1940, when Gandhi launched the Individual Satyagraha campaign, Aruna Asaf Ali took part in it and was arrested in Delhi.

In 1942, when Aruna went with her husband to attend the 45<sup>th</sup> Session of the Congress at Bombay and unfurled the national flag at Gowalia Tank Maidan, the police released gas to disperse the crowd. The sight of the white Sergeant trampling over the national flag that Aruna had unfurled a few minutes back, was a big motivating factor in her decision to channelize all her energies to the cause of the country’s freedom. To quote Aruna :

“A white Sergeant gave two minutes for the crowd to disperse. I quickly scrambled up to the dais, announced to the people the arrest of the leaders, and pulled the cord to hoist the national flag. Few knew my identity; some thought that the girl with plaited hair was a college student from Delhi. Hardly had the flag been unfurled when the police lobbed tear-gas shells into the crowd. The men and women ran helter-skelter with tears streaming from their eyes. Among them was Indira Gandhi, though I was not aware of it at the time. She had got married to Feroze less than five months earlier. “I had my first experience of a tear-gas attack at the flag-hoisting ceremony”, she recalls.

The experience of that morning made me decide that I would not again tamely enter jail by offering Satyagraha. The people were indignant at the arrest of the leaders and the indignation should find organized expression in such a forceful manner that the alien rulers would have no option but to quit India”.<sup>54</sup>

Apart from Aruna Asaf Ali, some other delegates who had come to attend the A.I.C.C. session at Bombay were Deshbandhu Gupta and Jugal Kishore Khanna. The three of them decided to go the Delhi quietly and organize the movement there, staying underground. In Delhi, she had a large number of friends who were prepared to provide shelter to her. A police officer who had made frantic efforts to trace Aruna reported to his senior officer, “as against nine of us who are searching for her, there are nine lakhs in Delhi alone to offer her protection and quarter. It is an uneven game and you can not blame us if we don’t succeed”.<sup>55</sup>

In the beginning of her underground life in Delhi, Aruna was looked after by Nirmala and Uma, the daughters of Dr. N.C. Joshi, eminent surgeon of Karol Bagh, West Delhi. He was a patriot to the core and believed in the lofty ideal of secularism. During the partition riots, he saved the lives of many Hindus and Muslims. Unfortunately, however, he was later killed by a Muslim fanatic.<sup>56</sup>

There are a number of stories connected with her underground life. Once she was warned that the place where she was putting up was no longer safe and that she should shift to some other place immediately. The notice was so short that she was at a loss to decide as to where she should go. Fortunately, she remembered reading an advertisement in the morning paper that an English family wanted a European paying guest. Aruna got into a taxi and dashed to the address advertised. The good old English lady was so captivated by Aruna's charming personality that she decided to wave aside her stipulations in favour of a European boarder and accepted Aruna as her paying guest. When the police arrived in great triumph to arrest her, they found that the mysterious bird had slipped out of their hands once again.<sup>57</sup>

Many eminent leaders began to feel that mere flocking into the jails would not be a fitting response to the reign of terror which had been unleashed by the British authorities. Socialists like Jaya prakash Narain, Ram Manohar Lohia, Achyut Patwardhan and Aruna Asaf Ali and also staunch Gandhians like R.R. Diwakar and Sucheta Kripalani felt that there was an urgent need to plan an organized movement on the lines of anti-Fascist resistance in Occupied Europe.

All the committed Socialists, including Aruna Asaf Ali, went underground with the purpose of effectively organizing people's resistance to the British authorities and to dislocate the war effort. Aruna Asaf Ali informs :

The only Left group to stand apart, and even to oppose us, were the Indian communists. They believed that Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941 had transformed the hostilities into a people's war. We felt differently. While we deeply sympathised with the Soviet people and admired their heroic resistance to Hitler's hordes, we were of the view that they were fighting for their freedom and we for ours and there was no contradiction between the two struggles.<sup>58</sup>

While underground, Aruna Asaf Ali rendered useful services to her countrymen in a variety of ways. She and her colleagues toured the famine stricken areas often and tried to help the poor villagers by looking after their needs. It would be interesting to note that it was the pilot Biju Patnaik (who later became the Chief Minister of Orissa), who in a plane requisitioned for military purposes facilitated Aruna's visits to many remote districts and rural areas.<sup>59</sup>

However, the hard underground life to which Aruna was not accustomed took its toll and her health started deteriorating. But the help and cooperation which was given to her by many of her friends in different parts of the country enabled her to regain her lost health. Aruna writes :

Much has been made of my own part in the movement. I was but a splinter of the lava thrown up by the volcanic eruption of a people's indignation. It is true that during my underground existence for three-and-a-half years, the incessant travel, unaccustomed living conditions, food at irregular hours, and the constant tension told on my health. But so many other comrades in the movement suffered similar or greater hardship.

If I had often to undergo discomfort, there were interludes when I was affectionately taken care of by sympathisers of the cause of freedom. They belonged to all sections of Indian society including the patriotic bourgeoisie. I remember how Mridula Sarabhai, after she came to know that I was in Bombay and was ill, located me and drove me to the palatial home of her wealthy kin, who took me into their care despite the harm that could come to them for harbouring a fugitive for whose capture the police had announced a reward. There were similar, kindly hosts in Delhi and Calcutta and elsewhere who not only helped me to recover my health with medication and nourishing food but supplied me with the rich silks and fancy goggles of a society lady which I used as disguise, in place of my accustomed wear of grey and printed khadi.<sup>60</sup>

Though Aruna was a great admirer of Gandhi, she had her own independent thinking and chose to follow a different path during the Quit India days. She writes : "But for Gandhi ji's innumerable campaigns which drew together the masses as no other movement did, we could not have availed ourselves of the opportunities for revolutionary

action which suddenly opened up when war came in 1939".<sup>61</sup> Gandhi's repeated advice to her to surrender was not acceptable to her and she continued leading a life of a fugitive revolutionary. She said : "It was under these circumstances that we took a resolve that as long as there is breath in us we shall not shut up in the prisons of the enemy".<sup>62</sup>

Some Gandhians like Sucheta Kripalani were of the opinion that sabotaging the war effort which Aruna Asaf Ali and other Socialists were organizing was against the Gandhian ideals of non-violence. This was somewhat surprising because in the illegally circulated pamphlets, the socialists had made it very clear that the strategy of planned dislocation of Britain's imperialist war effort did not mean senseless destruction of life and property. Through sabotage they wanted to bring about a mass uprising. But even though some ardent Gandhians severed their links with Aruna for her alleged violent activities, neither Gandhi nor Nehru disowned her. In fact Gandhi wrote to Aruna on 9 June 1944: "I have been filled with admiration for your courage and heroism. I have sent you messages that you must not die underground. You are reduced to a skeleton. Do come out and surrender yourself and win the prize offered for your arrest. Reserve the prize money for the Harijan cause".<sup>63</sup>

Nehru also, while speaking at Almora on 16 June 1945, made the following observation in regard to Aruna Asaf Ali :

I pay homage to those who are playing with their lives and those who are now at the door of death. Among them, it is only in the fitness of things that I must take

the name of one of India's brave woman, Aruna Asaf Ali. If my voice can reach her, I want to send her my love and esteem. I want to tell her that whatever she has done shall not be wasted and will bear fruit. It will leave its impression on her countrymen.<sup>64</sup>

Aruna also differed with Nehru on the question of tricolour flag flying on the red Fort. She said :

This Red Fort is the constant reminder of our national humiliation. Every stone of this evil and monstrous structure serves us with a daily reminder of humiliation of Bahadur Shah. It was in this building that the last of our independent ruler was presented with the heads of his sons.... Such being the ugly memories of this Red Fort, how can we tolerate even for a second the sight of this murder house where hundreds of our patriots have been done to death.<sup>65</sup>

She further declared that “the national flag should be hoisted not on the Red Fort but on the Imperial Secretariat where ordinances after ordinances were manufactured in 1942 to suppress the rising of the people of India when their leaders were in Ahmadnagar Jail”.<sup>66</sup>

### Usha Mehta's Contribution

Born on 24 March 1920 at Satara district, Surat, Usha Mehta was the witness to the important resolution of the Quit India Movement. To make this resolution a success,

she wanted to do something different and more challenging than mere picketing of foreign cloth and liquor shops. When some of her friends placed before her the idea of running a secret transmitting station, she felt greatly interested. To quote her : “It appealed to me immensely and I jumped at the idea and plunged into the movement in spite of staunch opposition from my father who being a government servant did not approve of my idea and who wanted me to finish my education”.<sup>67</sup>

Though her father – a government servant – was very much against this idea, yet Usha remained adamant and firmly committed to her plans.

It was from 9 August 1942 when most of the important leaders were in jail that Usha started making preparations for setting up a radio in the name of “Voice of Freedom”.<sup>68</sup> A transmitter was necessary for the success of the project. Babubhai Khakar and Usha Mehta were the pioneers of this project. But they did not have the necessary funds. A woman relative of Usha came forward to offer her jewellery but Usha did not think it proper to accept this offer. Ultimately, Babubhai Khakar managed to pool the funds, which enabled the setting up of the transmitter.<sup>69</sup> “The Congress Radio had its own transmitter, transmitting station, recording station, its own call sign and last but not the least a distinct wave-length. It started broadcasting on August 14, 1942. ‘This is the Congress Radio calling on 42.84 metres from somewhere in India’”.<sup>70</sup>

In order to make sure that the police was kept at bay, they frequently kept changing their abode. According to Usha :



Fortunately for us, one uncle from upcountry or our sister or some other relative would come to our rescue. Uncle wanted a flat for one month. One of his nephews would go and hire it, take all the luggage there and would anxiously wait for him. But by the time uncle was expected another flat would have to be hired for some other fictitious purpose. Every time the process was to go from the broadcasting station to the railway station and from there again to the new transmitting station. This had to be done every fortnight or so. Once Babubhai and I found a very good place; quite safe according to us. We were extremely happy at the idea that we would be able to carry on at least for a month or two. We went to the owner to pay the rent. A queer apparatus was lying there. We said "Sethji, what is this supposed to be?" 'A detecting machine to catch the illegal radios', came the reply. "Detecting machine", I exclaimed in my mind, but I took care to see that the face did not betray the expressions. Babubhai cleverly joined him in abusing all those who did such illegal acts and we were off. We thanked our stars for having been cautioned in time. The first words of Babubhai were "Behn, we are saved from the tiger's jaws".<sup>71</sup>

The main job of Usha was to broadcast news and give talks in Hindustani. Credit goes to this broadcasting station for being the first one to relay the news of Chittagong bomb raid, Jamshedpur strike and the atrocities committed in Ashti Chimur. The speeches were basically meant to highlight the Congress stand both from the rational and international points of view. In regard to the Quit India movement, the following

comments were relayed : “So far we were conducting a movement, but now we are conducting a revolution. In a revolution, there is victory or defeat. This revolution is not of one party or community, but of the whole of India, we hope you will not rest content till the British Empire is burnt to ashes”.<sup>72</sup>

Aruna Asaf Ali says that the transmission made by the Congress radio to be of considerable help in making the movement successful. She writes :

We had cooperation, too, from young entrepreneurs and technologists with whose help a Congress Radio came up in Bombay and managed to function for more than four months. Babubhai Khakhar and Vithalbhai K. Jhaveri procured the money and the materials for the transmitter as well as the technical experts. The chief announcer was Usha Mehta, who was working for her Master's degree and was one of the tens of thousands of students all over the country who joined the 1942 movement. ‘The only political activity that she had so far been involved in’, says Vijay Agnew, ‘was meeting with fellow students interested in promoting the use of Hindi as a national language’. The Congress Radio operated from 20 August 1942 till the end of December, with Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia as a frequent speaker. The station countered the alien rulers’ propaganda disseminated by “anti-India Radio”, as we called the British-controlled All India Radio. The clandestine radio station, announcing itself as broadcasting from ‘somewhere in India’, would play every day Iqbal’s Sare Jahan se Achha Hindustan Hamara as well as Bande Mataram”.<sup>73</sup>

However, this radio received a big setback when the Government came to know of it and raided the place on the night of 12 November 1942. Babubhai and Usha were arrested in the Radio Conspiracy Case. The police made all possible efforts to get the details from Usha Mehta but she did not budge an inch. Describing her life in the police custody, she informs : “The lock up period is perhaps the most trying time in the life of a prisoner. During the day you have to face the policemen and at night your only possible activity could be either to kill the bugs or to kill time. Again it is humanly impossible to sleep in a cell full of filth, dirt and nauseating smell”.<sup>74</sup>

In spite of six months continuous interrogation, the police could not get any information from her and finally charged her with agreeing in conspiring among and between ourselves and others, to do or cause to be done illegal acts like possessing, establishing, maintaining and working illegal wireless telegraph without lawful... authority or excuse prejudicial acts and spreading prejudicial reports.<sup>75</sup>

Usha Mehta was finally sentenced to four years imprisonment. She remained in the jail till April 1946.

A secret letter dated 27<sup>th</sup> January, 1943, from the Home Department (Special), Bombay, to Sir Richard Tottenham, Additional Secretary to the Government of India, forwards a report by the Commissioner of Police, Bombay on the Congress Radio case. The report contains a note on Miss Usha Mehta who made several of the records used in

the broadcast and also operated the transmitter. The report says 'she is obviously an ardent Congress woman'. Also enclosed is a police wireless monitoring report for the 20<sup>th</sup> October, 1942, of the 'illegal Congress Radio'. It records the speech of a female speaker saying 'the Congress sends her message of goodwill and peace to all the people of the world'.<sup>76</sup>

### Satyawati's Contribution

Satyawati also played a prominent role in the Quit India movement. She was, however, of the view that by remaining underground she would be able to organize the movement in a much better way. For the Delhi region, Satyawati, Premjas Rai and Jugal Kishore Khanna were acting as the high command; they were leading the movement secretly. Satyawati moved around in a car with tinted glasses along with Aruna Asaf Ali urging people to extend their whole-hearted cooperation to the Quit India movement, after the arrest of Gandhi and other leaders.<sup>77</sup> She was also in regular touch with the Students' Federation and motivated the student community to come forward in support of the movement. Besides, she also gave the lead to a number of workers' associations and labour unions. For her active involvement in the Quit India movement, Satyawati, along with her son Krishan Kumar, mother Ved Kumari and sister Kaushalya and her elder daughter Kusum were taken into police custody. But soon Satyawati fell ill and she and her mother Ved Kumari were sent to a sanatorium in the hills. Ved Kumari was expected to take care of her during her illness.<sup>78</sup>

Satyawati faced another tragedy when her younger daughter Munna took seriously ill, due to separation from her mother, and subsequently died. Surprisingly, the British authorities did not convey the message about Munna's serious illness to Satyawati. Nor, for that matter, did they allow Satyawati to come to Delhi. It was sad indeed that the dying child was deprived a meeting with her mother during her last moments.

To register her protest against her internment, Satyawati conveyed the following message to the Governor of Punjab and to the Chief Commissioner of Delhi : "As a non-violent fighter, I have to resist all evil forces of the world to save human rights and it is my effort to liberate human society from cruelty, exploitation and tyrannies of imperialism and fascism".<sup>79</sup>

Satyawati passed away on 21 October 1945. Thousands of tearful mourners came to pay homage to the departed leader who had played an important role in mobilizing women, students, workers and peasants in Delhi.

The Quit India movement soon spread to many areas, particularly in parts of Bihar and eastern provinces and in some pockets of Bengal, Orissa, Karnataka and Maharashtra. The peasantry played a big role in this movement. Some areas were even liberated for some time.

Orissa

The Gandhian ideology of non-violence had always had a special appeal to the Oriya temperament.<sup>80</sup> Therefore, the Oriyas took active part in the movement with utmost enthusiasm in large numbers. At the historic session of the Congress held at Bombay on 8 August 1942, many Oriya Congress workers, including Malati Choudhury, were present. On 9 August 1942, the police arrested almost all the eminent Congress leaders of Orissa. While some leaders, including Rama Devi – a staunch Gandhian – voluntarily courted arrest,<sup>81</sup> there were others like Malati Choudhury and S.N. Dwivedi,<sup>82</sup> who managed to hoodwink the police and came to Cuttack via Bhubaneswar.

Malati Choudhury encountered great difficulty during her journey from Bombay to Cuttack. At the Bhubaneswar station the police had maintained a strict vigil. She therefore, ventured to walk all the way to Cuttack. It was midnight; the Kathjoli river was flooded and the Kathjoli bridge was guarded by the police. But she managed to overcome these obstacles : with the help of a broken boat <sup>83</sup> and singing the song of poet Nijarul, <sup>84</sup> she crossed the flooded river. Thus risking her life she reached Cuttack and laid the foundation of the “August Revolution” in Orissa.<sup>85</sup>

Gandhi had wanted the Quit India movement to be vastly different from the traditional Satyagraha. He wanted this movement to be imbued with the spirit of “do or die” wherein there should be open defiance of law and refusal to pay taxes. In Orissa, under the leadership of Malati Choudhury and S.N. Dwivedi, a large number of women actively involved themselves with the Quit India movement. At Malati’s instructions,

railway lines were tampered with and telephone wires were disconnected – the idea was to help the Congress workers to accomplish their mission without any obstacles.<sup>86</sup> At the same time there were strikes, protest meetings and open defiance of law. People even went to the extent of looting banks and Government treasury. Thus within a few days, the situation assumed serious proportions, with political prisoners inside the jail violating the jail regulations and undermine the authority of the jailors.<sup>87</sup>

The Government thus was forced to declare the AICC Working Committee and other such bodies within the province as illegal. On 16 August, 1942, at Bari, Mangala Devi made a gigantic effort to “free the Congress ashram which had been attacked and taken over by the police”.<sup>88</sup> She was arrested along with other women workers when she was trying to burn the seized property and uniform belonging to the police. Other women to have been arrested by the police were Rama Devi, Malati Choudhury, Priyambada Devi, Godavari Devi and some other Congress workers. Annapurna Moharana, along with a group of agitators, demanded their immediate release and broke the police cordon. In order to bring the situation under control, the police had to resort to firing.<sup>89</sup>

In places like Jagatsingpur, Tirtol and Balikuda, the situation was quite grave with people becoming violently and setting on fire some government institutions like post offices, police barracks, etc. In order to check this violence, the ADM and the Additional Suptd. Of Police announced imposition of many fines on people. Annapurna Moharana once again made her presence felt by strongly protesting against the imposition of fines. She was again arrested by the police and was sent to Cuttack jail which, on that

memorable occasion, was filled with women Satyagrahis.<sup>90</sup> People at Eram in the Balasore district prevented the Government officials from carrying out their duties which was a provocation enough for the police to resort to firing.<sup>91</sup> In the melee which ensued, a number of women Satyagrahis were injured and one of them —Pari Bewa – died on the spot. One Jambuvati Devi of Sambalpur “crossed the Orissa border and led a procession starting from Ghoramora Training School to Tumuka in Bihar. She attacked the district court of Turika, was arrested by the police, suffered injuries in the process, and died in Bihar on 15 July 1943.<sup>92</sup>

Nandini Devi, <sup>93</sup> a student leader, took an active part in the movement in the Ravenshaw College. She was arrested by the police – and because of her active involvement in political activities – and subsequently rusticated by the College.

During the Quit India movement, some Oriya women spread the patriotic spirit through literature. The most notable example in this respect is that of Sitadevi Khadanga who wrote a number of books propagating the message of Gandhi. In her work *Posyaputra*, she made an earnest appeal to the masses to make all possible sacrifices for the sake of the country’s liberation. <sup>94</sup>

The women who made remarkable contributions by way of making the Quit India movement popular in Orissa were : Malati Choudhury, Rama Devi, Sarala Devi, Annapurna Moharana, Mangala Devi, Suryamani Devi, Gunamanjari Devi, Champa Devi, Hemalata Devi, Suryamma, P. Tamma, A. Laxmibai, Parvati Devi, Jambuvati



Devi, Radhika Devi, Parvati Devi, Sitadevi Khadanga, and some others. The contributions made by them were all the more commendable, particularly considering that all the prominent male leaders at that time were behind the bars. Gandhi paid a compliment to them in the following words : “I have had the privilege of mixing with tens and thousands of India’s women, I have seen them at work. But nowhere have I seen anything quite like what Ramadevi and her little band have been found to do, so gracefully and so naturally”.<sup>95</sup>

## Bihar

In Patna the Mahila Charkha Samiti was actively associated with the Quit India movement. On 9 August 1942, the members of this Samiti took out a big procession. After passing through the entire town, the procession finally stopped at Congress Maidan where a meeting was held in which Bhagwati Devi, Rampyari Devi and Sundari Devi made forceful speeches exhorting the Government servants to resign and the lawyers to leave their practice.<sup>96</sup> Among the many women who took part in the movement in Bihar, the names of Sarala Devi, Usha Rani Mukherji and Saroj Das of Palamau District stand out prominently.<sup>97</sup> Other women who were involved in the movement were Prabhawati, Priyamvada Nandkeoliyar, Krishna Devi, Girija Devi, Manorama Devi and Shakuntala Devi.<sup>98</sup>

Prabhawati was lodged in the Bhagalpur Central Jail for three years. Krishna Devi remained underground with her family in Nepal. Girija Devi was badly assaulted by the police.

In the Monghyr District also, women were actively associated with the movement. In Ruiyar village under Chautham police station, the people became victims of police atrocities. On 2 September 1942, the police resorted to firing in which many women died along with their kids. "Mrs Hunkeri Telin died along with her three-year old daughter and seven-year old son. Surti Devi died with her three-year old child".<sup>99</sup> Mrs Hakni and Mrs Sampatia along with her daughter died in a police firing".<sup>100</sup>

In Palamau District, Kumari A.R. Das played an important role in making the August Revolution successful. In the Manbhum District of Purelia, a number of women were arrested. The police raided the Shilpa Ashram in Purulia and took into custody Lavanya Prabha Ghosh and her daughter Kamla Ghosh.<sup>101</sup>

In the Hazaribagh District, Saraswati Devi made her presence felt when she took over the mantle of leadership consequent upon the arrest of prominent male leaders. She organized a big procession on 11.8.1942, but was arrested the same day. On 12 August when she was being transported to Bhagalpur jail along with another woman prisoner, a group of students freed her from police custody in Nathnagar and she was brought in a procession to Bhagalpur.<sup>102</sup> At Bhagalpur, she addressed a gathering of students in Lajpat Park. She was again arrested on 14 August while entering the office of SDO.<sup>103</sup>

In Santhal Parganas, Jamvati Devi and Prema Devi headed a big procession on 18 August 1942. Sharda Devi also organized huge processions in Rajmahal and Sahabganj. She was sentenced to an year's imprisonment.<sup>104</sup> Viraji Madhiain of Ghoramara village was killed by police bullets.<sup>105</sup>

## Bengal

The people of Midnapore district had played an important role in the Quit India movement. Among the "national governments" which were formed in some areas was the Tamralipta Jatiya Sarkar formed at Tamluk in Bengal. It had its own army called Vidyut Vahini and a Sisters' Corps attached to it. This national government which functioned within the limits laid down by the Congress Committee kept on functioning till 8 August, 1944. It was dissolved at the instance of Gandhi.<sup>106</sup>

The women of Tamluk organized a number of processions, and in one of these seven women were arrested and an imprisonment of two years was awarded to each.<sup>107</sup> Manangini Hazra, a woman of seventy-two had led one such procession with the purpose of occupying the Thana. The police started inflicting blows on her hands, but she never loosened her grip and made sure that the flag which she was holding did not drop. At the Thana, she urged the officials to give up their jobs and join the national movement. Unfortunately, a bullet was fired at her which proved to be fatal.<sup>108</sup>

On 9 January 1943, six hundred soldiers surrounded three villages of Masuria, Dalmasuria and Chandipur in Mohishadal Thana. Apart from plundering these villages, the soldiers resorted to indecent behaviour and criminally assaulted as many as forty-six women on a single day.<sup>109</sup>

In order to protect their honour and self-respect, the women formed an organization called Bhagini Seva Sangh. Some of the women affiliated to this organization kept weapons with them so as to protect themselves from criminal assault. Two women were prosecuted under the Arms Act for drawing out daggers in self-defence.<sup>110</sup>

Apart from Orissa, Bihar and Bengal, women in other states also took part in the Quit India movement. In Assam, on 20 October, 1942, Kanak Lata Barua, a teenaged girl, led a procession of five hundred people towards Gohapon Thana;<sup>111</sup> in Punjab Rajkumari Amrit Kaur took an active part in the Quit India movement and led a number of processions from 9 August to 16 August 1942; in Dharwar (Karnataka), on 23 October 1942, two young women – Hemlata Shenolikar and Gulvadi – entered the District courts and hoisted the tri-colour on the Judge's seat.<sup>112</sup>

### III

## The Indian National Army with Special Reference to Captain Lakshmi Swaminathan's Role

The role of women in the national movement did not remain confined to India. Outside India also, they were actively associated with the national movement, the most notable example being their association with the Indian National Army of Subhas Chandra Bose.<sup>113</sup> Bose, whose political ideology was much different than that of Congress, left Calcutta for Berlin in January 1941 to strike a deal with Hitler. An year and a half later he reached Tokyo by submarine where he took charge of Indian prisoners of war. These prisoners were taken to Singapore where an army of liberation was to be formed.<sup>114</sup>

The Indian Independence League was formed on 16 January 1942 at Kuala Lumpur. Subsequently, its branches were formed at Thailand and other places. At that time the number of Indian prisoners at Kuala Lumpur had swelled to five thousand. Captain Mohan Singh urged them to join the Indian National Army to fight the British in Malaya and at other places.<sup>115</sup>

In March 1943, women's section of the Indian Independence League came into being. On 9 July 1943, Subhas Bose was made the President of the League's branch at Singapore. In the course of the speech delivered by him, Bose emphasized the need to

involve women in the national movement. He said that he wanted “a unit of brave Indian women”<sup>116</sup> to make his mission successful. In keeping with his immense faith in the woman power, he added a Department of Women’s Affairs to the League and appointed Dr. Lakshmi Swaminathan as its head.<sup>117</sup>

Daughter of Bbarrister S. Swaminathan and Ammu Swaminathan – the first woman worker of Madras Congress – Lakshmi Swaminathan was a doctor by profession. She passed her M.B.B.S. in 1937. During the Second World War, she was in Singapore, where she had founded a hospital and served her countrymen. She offered her services at Netaji’s call and took over as Commander of the Women’s Rani Jhansi Regiment. She served as Minister of Social Welfare and Medicine in the Azad Hind Cabinet. As a result of the efforts made by her, the number of women fighters of the Rani Jhansi Regiment increased from 175 to 2000. Apart from general services this women force displayed great courage in the famous battle of ‘Imphal’ on the Indian border, and emerged victorious over the British.

In ‘Maulmen, during the defeat of the ‘Azad Hind force’, Captain Lakshmi and her force persevered bravely till Netaji passed out safely, only after which she surrendered. She was captured and her Regiment was disbanded in 1945 and most of the girls were sent away to singapore from Rangoon. Lakshmi was also sent to Rangoon jail. There was a great deal of agitation for her release and the government had to yield, and released her on the condition that she would not make any public speech. But she defied the order and spoke on the anniversary of the Azad Hind Force on 21 October, 1945. She was again arrested and was flown

to 'Meikilita' from where she was taken to 'Kalawa' in a military car. She was released after a year. She came to India and was married to Captain Sehgal of the Indian National Army.<sup>118</sup>

#### IV

At the midnight hour of 14-15 August 1947 when the dawn of freedom was being celebrated in Delhi, Gandhi was in Calcutta where communal riots had taken an ugly turn. In order to restore communal harmony he went on a fast. It was only when on 4 September that all the communities gave him a written assurance, that he came to Delhi. In Delhi too he continued with his efforts for the restoration of communal harmony right till his assassination on 30 January. 1948.

After taking over as Prime Minister of India, Nehru too made all possible efforts, both at the administrative and personal levels, to bring about communal harmony. At the suggestion of Gandhi, Nehru's daughter Indira too took the plunge and played a remarkable role in restoring the spirit of camaraderie between the two communities. Indira Gandhi recalls :

We used to go out at five in the morning and come back long after dark. We got the streets cleaned. We went to the Town Hall. The ration shops were there, but to get the rations, nobody would give us conveyance.... The sweepers were not

prepared to go because they said they would be killed. We had to provide two young men for each sweeper as a guard....

We went to the Hindu mohallas and said: 'Is there a Muslim in this particular neighbourhood who, you would say, had been quite secular and had done nothing against Hindus?' They would say: 'Oh! Yes, there is so and so'. Then we went to the Muslims and asked: 'In all this rioting, is there a single Hindu who you can say has either positively helped you or at least not done anything wrong?' They said: 'Yes, there is so and so'. Then we said, 'Are you willing to meet them'? They would say: 'No, we simply can't meet'. We had to go backwards and forwards from place to place.... In between my father started getting rather threatening letters saying: 'Our daughters have been raped and killed and now she is working amongst the Muslims and we are going to do this to her' ... but finally we did get a small group to sit in a place and talk and agree that this had to be ended.<sup>119</sup>

Another important woman from the Nehru family who was actively involved in ensuring the safe journey of refugees at the time of partition was Rameshwari Nehru, who was staying in Lahore with her husband Brijlal a few months preceding the partition. Just as Muslims in Delhi were in a state of terror and were being harassed, so were the Hindus in Lahore. Thousands of Hindu and Sikh families from Rawalpindi, Multan, Gujranwala and Peshawar had assembled at Lala Lajpat Rai Bhawan in Lahore from where they were to be evacuated to India. Rameshwari Nehru recalls:



With whatever little belongings they could get hold of. My husband and I ... went to Lala Lajpat Rai Bhawan every day to look after refugees and as far as possible arranged their safe journey to India in a reliable company. It appeared at that moment that it was impossible for any Hindu-Sikh family to stay on in Punjab with dignity. My husband wrote to Gandhiji then defending the people of Noakhali, as to 'what should we do?' Prompt came the reply, 'You should not leave Lahore. Even if you die, I shall not shed tears'.<sup>120</sup>

It was only when the last batch of refugees was evacuated from Lahore in October 1947 that Rameshwari Nehru and her husband Brijlal came to Delhi. Indeed, their effort was highly commendable, particularly considering that they did all this at the risk of their lives. In his biography, O.P. Paliwal paid rich compliments to Rameshwari in the following words : "Rameshwari was a source of comfort and solace to the minority community on this side -- to the Muslims in India as much as she was attentive to the 'minority' on that side of the fence in Punjab".<sup>121</sup>

In her capacity as Hony Adviser to the Ministry of Rehabilitation in Delhi, Rameshwari Nehru did everything she could to restore the abducted persons to their families. Mridula Sarabhai too joined Rameshwari in this noble work with utmost enthusiasm and real.

Concluding remarks:

After the passing of the Quit India resolution in August 1942, a new generation of women – which was prepared to undertake dangerous and challenging tasks – began to emerge. This period saw the women playing a much more aggressive role as compared to the 1930s. The August Revolution became so widespread that even people of rural areas and tribals started taking a keen interest in the movement and played a significant role in the last phase of the freedom struggle. It would be interesting to note that in the Koraput region of Orissa, even those tribal women who had no idea of politics had joined this movement, notable examples being Mrs Misti Kasturi, Subarna, Sutank, Aryati, Kumari Jhara, Mrs Jamuna, Mrs Jani, Kumari Tandra and Kumari Draupadi.<sup>122</sup> Thus, the traditional image of women as weak and helpless creatures underwent a radical transformation. Their levels of confidence increased manifold and they had a new role to play in the national mainstream.

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82. O fellow travellers

We would have to cross over

The arduous expansive sea

And overcome the insurmountable

Heights of mountains

In the night's fathomless hour

Be aware.

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## **CHAPTER-VIII**

### **THE ASSESSMENT**

#### **A Critical Analysis of Gandhi's Role in the Mass Mobilization of Women**

In the early years of the twentieth century, the number of women associated with political activities was marginal. Moreover, the participation of women was restricted only to those belonging to the elite classes whose presence was symbolic rather than active political participation. The partition of Bengal in 1905 and the entry of Annie Besant into politics in 1914 did infuse a new patriotic spirit among women, but still the participation of women in the national movement on a mass scale was lacking. This could partly be attributed to the social environment of those times which was too conservative to allow women to associate themselves with such activities.

But with the advent of Gandhi on the political scene of India, a radical transformation took place in the attitude of women and they began to come forward in increasing numbers to contribute their humble mite to the cause of the country's emancipation. To start with, however, the participation of women in the non-cooperation campaign (1920-22) was not on a big scale and was "mainly confined to those, whose husbands, fathers, brothers or sons had already joined the struggle and were in jail".<sup>1</sup> But by the time the Civil Disobedience movement started in the early 1930s, women began to associate themselves with the national movement in increasing numbers in different parts of the country and started taking part in activities like picketing of shops selling foreign cloth and liquor, salt making, public demonstrations, propagation of charkha and khadi, etc.

And with the passing of the Quit India resolution in August 1942, a new generation of women – which was prepared to undertake dangerous and challenging tasks – began to emerge. In contrast to the desh sevikas of the 1930s who were clad

in orange and white sarees, the 1940s saw the women play aggressive roles. A conspicuous feature of the 1940s was that women from both the middle and lower class families became victims of police brutalities. But this did not dampen their spirits, and they stuck to their task with utmost determination. In many provinces and districts women became 'dictators' to run the Congress movement. All this went a long way in transforming the self-perception of women and "gave them a new sense of power, a new self-view".<sup>2</sup> Indeed, full credit goes to Gandhi who succeeded in mobilizing women in such large numbers and in motivating them to fight for the country's emancipation. The questions that arise are : What made it possible for women to take part in nationalist politics, when other forms of politicization, indeed other means of public activity were strictly denied to them? How come that even after having played such an important role in the national movement, women reverted to their age-old traditional roles at home after the attainment of the country's independence ?

Transformation of nationalism into a religion was one of the important factors which facilitated women's participation in the movement. Freedom struggle was looked upon as *desh puja*. It was by virtue of Gandhi's image as a saint and the perception of the patriotic struggle as essentially a religious duty that the feminine role could be combined with nationalist politics. This meant that even despite their active involvement in the national movement, women could not become a part of the political process. In fact they were sharing a religious mission –

...a role deeply embedded in a tradition sanctified by the example of Meera Bai and the 'sanyasinis'. The stress on the personal saintliness of Gandhi, a subtle symbiosis between the religious and the political in the nationalist message under his leadership, enabled nationalism to transcend the realm of politics and elevate itself to a religious domain. This was no innovation of Gandhi, however, who actually strengthened and continued an inherited tradition which started with Bankimchandra's *Bande Mataram*—his hymn to the Motherland—and was further consolidated with the Extremist discourse

on nationalism. Patriotism was subsumed within religion, the country became a vivid new deity added to the Hindu pantheon, and, by a sleigh of hand, became at once the highest deity from the moment of her deification: 'it is your image that we worship in the temples.'<sup>3</sup>

The motherland was identified with mother Goddess, and sacrifice of the highest order was required if the motherland was to be liberated. This was particularly relevant to women, who were supposed to be the manifestations of the Supreme Shakti herself. The nationalists capitalized on this and succeeded in mobilizing women by asserting that "unless the vital principle of Shakti imprisoned in women is released, the great act of sacrifice will not be complete".<sup>4</sup> Though the strong traditional moorings of the national movement did facilitate the participation of thousands of women in the national movement, yet at the time the idea of any permanent reversal of the customary roles of women was never considered by Gandhi.

It may further be noted that Gandhi interpreted women's political participation as an extension of their traditional roles. He placed before women the example of the suffering Sita who was his ideal woman. Gandhi believed that women's involvement in the freedom struggle was necessary for both ideological and practical reasons. If women could be involved, the national movement could be linked to every home in India.<sup>5</sup> Gandhi very ingeniously used the extended family concept as a powerful metaphorical construct for the extension of women's role outside their homes into the areas of public activity in the context of the national movement.

Another important programme through which Gandhi had ensured the participation of a large number of women in the national movement was the khadi programme. This programme was particularly directed to women. A large number of women was associated with this programme in its various dimensions. Many women took part in the picketing of shops selling foreign cloth, while others had cultivated the habit of spinning the charkha. Many widows also got engaged with

spinning activity with the purpose of earning some money.<sup>6</sup> Mothers encouraged their sons to earn their livelihood through the manufacture and sale of Swadeshi goods. Above all, at many places mahila shilpamelas were organized where handicrafts and khadi clothes were sold.<sup>7</sup> In many patriotic songs women were depicted as making an earnest request to their husbands to buy charkhas for them so that they could carry out their religious duties and also supplement their family income. The importance which women attached to khadi is depicted in the following patriotic song :

I request you, O Lord; with folded hands and lying prostrate at your feet to bring for me a swadeshi sari. I will wear chunari. This is singar of sohagin, the saput of widows; .... Fill with wealth and purify the body of mother.

I will spin yarn and weave cloth as sanctioned by dharma. The excess of scarcity is now really intolerable, o dear, raise my veil a little and teach some arts to me.

Don't forget the old traditions. Charkha worship is written in karma kand.<sup>8</sup>

One important reason why the nationalists attached a special significance to khadi was that as a result of the import of a large amount of foreign made cloth by the British authorities, the indigenous weaving craft had got a big setback. The Swadeshi movement thus aimed at reviving the local textile industry. In due course, handloom weaving became a powerful symbol of moral and spiritual regeneration in India. Spinning became a spiritual activity which could purge the spinner of all impurities. The wheel also assumed the status of being one of the members of the family. Gandhi repeatedly emphasized the spiritual aspect of spinning and said that through this activity a person could become a noble human being. The nationalists tried to infuse into the minds of people the idea that Indian men and women became poor and naked because of the consumption of foreign goods worth millions of rupees. Gandhi particularly emphasized the image of female nakedness and shame, as can be seen from the following statement :

The tyrants stripped off the clothes from the body of our sisters on road. We shall never put them on again.... It is our duty to use the spinning wheel and cut off the fetters of bondage and to save Mother India from the shame of being stripped naked like Draupadi.<sup>9</sup>

The nationalist leaders were thus able to associate women with the khadi programme through constant use of themes like protection, female nakedness, shame, etc. khadi became a religious symbol. And any programme which had religious overtones, greatly facilitated mobilization of women in large numbers. In the following statement, the religious aspect of spinning has been highlighted:

The sohagin adjusted the charkha, fitted the handloom and took up the gin. When she sat on the stool and began to spin yarn, she waked up the yoginis. When she put on the newly-woven cloth and set out for the market even good women began to feel jealous of her.<sup>10</sup>

Spinning was particularly recommended for every woman who was inclined towards spirituality. Moreover, participation in this activity did not contradict the socially accepted roles of women within the home; on the contrary it strengthened that role.

However, it would be interesting to note that even though Gandhi urged women to take the swadeshi vow and to spend some time each day in spinning, yet he never had the notion of women's identity as wage – earners. In fact, Gandhi asserted that the spinning activity would reaffirm the ancient status of women.<sup>11</sup> The image of women as nurturers rather than wage-earners was pre-dominant in the minds of the nationalists at the time when they were trying to involve more and more women in this activity. The role of spinning was merely confined to supplement the family income, as can be seen from the following statement of Gandhi :

Every yard of Khaddar purchased means a few coppers in the hands of women. It is for the women of India, a large number of whom do not get even

an anna per day, that I am going about the country with my spinning wheel and my begging bowl. The same money which you spend on foreign cloth may be very usefully employed in covering the naked bodies of a few of the poor sisters.<sup>12</sup>

Gandhi never favoured the idea of economic independence of women. He looked upon spinning and weaving as religious acts which were suited to the gentle nature of women. He regarded women as the embodiment of suffering and sacrifice; and their entry into the political field would cleanse the system of all the corrupt practices. Thus, Gandhi's perception in regard to an equal status for women was limited to the religious sense of the term which was in conformity with patriarchal norms under which women's role was complementary to that of men.

To Gandhi, chastity of women was more important than her right as a worker. He strongly recommended the spinning of charkha to women because it gave them dignity and honour. To quote him :

Millions of people are starving. They feel the pinch of hunger, but they cannot go to the costly works that the government has opened for them. The work there mostly consists of breaking stones for the roads or carrying metal. And what are the conditions under which this work has to be done. The majority of them are women and they have to work under the supervision of the overseers who have no character to lose or keep and who are lustful. These women who ought to be as dear to you as your mothers or sisters, if you have any regard for them, have been weaned from this class of labour. This charkha gives them all that they need. It gives them dignity. An old lady of 60 years walks two miles to obtain silvers from my son and says 'tell your father he has given me something which is a blessing to me because it has given me a dignity which I did not have before'. Today there are millions of such men and women in Champaran to whom charkha would give independence. The wages of women there are anything between 5 and 6 pices



per day, those of boys between 3 and 4 pices and those of men between 8 and 10 pices.... How are they earning this income? No insolent overseers who rob these sisters of their shame and take one rupee as their dasturi of the three rupees that they give to them, but by working under the observation of clean lads who will regard their honour as sacred as of their own sisters and give them money with a smile. It makes all the difference in the world whether you receive 8 or 10 annas from insolent hands or four pice from hands sanctified with work. This is the dignity of Charkha.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, women's participation in the khadi programme was merely an extension of their domestic roles. On the basis of this, women could not claim an equal status with men in society. The nationalist ideology thus subjected women to a new patriarchy. The nationalists had little concern for the emancipation of women..

All this criticism, however, does not detract from the immense contributions made by Gandhi to the cause of Indian women's emancipation. "Like all solutions, Gandhi's solution had its own strengths and weaknesses. Yet whatever we these strengths and weaknesses",<sup>14</sup> the fact cannot be denied that it was because of Gandhi's influence that a mass mobilization of women could take place in different parts of the country. His achievement becomes all the more significant when we consider that large number of purdah bound women abandoned this unhealthy custom and started working alongside men for the cause of the country's freedom.<sup>15</sup>

Devaki Jain songs that for many women leaders in pre-independent India, Gandhi's call for Satyagraha opened the door for their own liberation from oppressive social customs. In the ashrams of Gandhi great importance was attached to respect for women. The ashram life thus made it possible for a large number of women to come out of the narrow confines of their homes and to interact with a wider community. Thus in a way Gandhi met the Indian tradition half way. "He directed it away from its establishment structures and towards its changing dynamics".<sup>16</sup> Devaki Jain further argues that it was this capacity to meet the Indian tradition half

way that enabled the women to extricate themselves to a certain extent from the firm grip of male-dominated patriarchal norms. Though Gandhi's approach was reformist and moderate in nature, he proved to be tactically effective as his approach provided vehicles and options for change.

It would not be proper to evaluate Gandhi's role on the basis of the Western feminist standards of the present-day times. In order to have a balanced perspective of the contribution made by Gandhi to the women's cause, it is important to consider the social environment of the times – 1920-1948-- during which the various Gandhian movements, starting time the non-cooperation movement of the early 1920s, took place. One must not overlook the fact that for a long time India had remained a colony of Britain; the primary concern of the nationalists therefore was to secure the country's freedom. Moreover, patriarchy was so deep-rooted in the Indian psyche that it was difficult to eliminate it completely. Therefore, given the constraints of those times, women's participation in such large numbers in the national movement was in itself a big achievement. Indeed, Gandhi deserves the highest accolade for being able to mobilize women on such a mass scale and to motivate them for actively participating in the national movement.

It is also not true to say that all women became passive and reverted to the age-old structure once the country became independent. It is not denied that the majority of women completely dissociated themselves from the political as well as social life after the country's independence, but at the same there was large number of women leaders (who took an active part in the national movement) who continued to be actively associated with Indian political and social life, notable examples being Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Sucheta Kripalani, Sarojini Naidu, Subhadra Joshi, Aruna Asaf Ali, Rameshwari Nehru, Mridula Sarabhai, and so on. There were others who continued to work for the women's cause through organizations like AIWC.

We may conclude by saying that the pride of having fought for the country's freedom, the experience of working outside the home, and the act of participating shoulder to shoulder with men and the memories of jail and lathi charge went a long way in infusing a spirit of self-confidence and self-respect among the women of India, and in enhancing their status in society.

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